



**FRIENDSHIP AND INTIMACY:  
EXPLORING MALAYSIAN STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF LIVING  
TEMPORARILY ABROAD**

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I declare that this thesis is my own work and that it has not been submitted in any form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **Friendship and Intimacy: Exploring Malaysian Students' Experiences of Living Temporarily Abroad**

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Living abroad, albeit temporarily for the purposes of study, poses challenges for international students who must survive alone in unfamiliar surroundings at a relatively young age. The purpose of this study is to explore close friendships and intimacy practices of Malaysian students in the context of living abroad and how they form and maintain intimacy in their close friendships with both established friends in Malaysia and new friends in the UK. This study develops theories of 'distance' by exploring the meaning behind physical and emotional distance, as well as the situation of 'being temporarily abroad' and its relations to intimacy practices in close friendships. Distance is not only measured by geography or space but also by emotional closeness. Thus, the key question of this study is: does physical distance lead to emotional distance particularly in close friendships or does it enable new forms of intimacy?

Focusing on the Malaysian perspective, this study highlights the intimacy practices in close friendships in the context of gender practices and religious beliefs, family practices as well as emotional connectedness in online

interaction. It highlights how Malaysian cultural norms and beliefs shape the ways in which students practice intimacy in close friendships. To understand the concept of distance, intimacy and friendship practices, an in-depth qualitative study has been conducted with 18 Malaysian undergraduate and postgraduate taught students living in the UK. By using friendship maps, digital diaries and in-depth interview techniques, this study provides an in-depth understanding of close friendship and intimacy practices in the context of overseas study. It concludes that the ways in which Malaysian students practice close friendships when they are living temporarily abroad suggests that we require a rethinking of established notions of intimacy in order to go beyond an ethnocentric and universalist application of the concept.

## CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

When I decided to come to the UK to pursue my PhD study, I had mixed feelings about my decision. I was happy to gain great experiences as this was my first time moving and studying abroad. At the same time, I was worried that I would be lonely without any familiar faces, even though I knew that this situation was just temporary. I was afraid that I would lose my close relationships with family and friends in Malaysia as we would be separated by thousands of miles. For that reason, I considered lack of familiarity as one of the challenges for people living abroad. Living away from Malaysia has lessened the chance to meet my family and friends as it is costly to go back home frequently so face-to-face meetings are not possible; I also encountered the challenges to maintain close relationships. Bauman (2003) claims that personal relationships at a distance are easily broken. However, I argue that maintaining personal relationships at a distance is far more complex but not impossible. My argument about changes in friendship bonds and practices runs along the same lines. In this study, I argue that the temporary status of being abroad influences the ways in which Malaysian students maintain long-distance (LD) and form new geographically close (GC) close friendships.

I choose Malaysian students as participants in my study considering student sojourners as the best-researched group in this context. Although students as a subject are over-studied in much social research, this group is the right and only possible choice to answer my research question as students are readily available, used to learning and were committed to my study (Gächter 2010). It

is very common for Malaysian students to study abroad then go back home to work so this is why my study is really significant as it helps to understand those students' experiences. It is important for the students, as well as British universities to pay attention to close friendship practices as one of the significant factors of adaptation and adjustment. Moreover, my position as a Malaysian student allows me to draw on my own lived experiences and self-reflexivity. I explain the criteria for selecting the students, the instruments for data collection and my reflexivity for this project thoroughly in the methodology chapter later in this thesis.

Living temporarily abroad is one of the significant life events experienced by many individuals. People would possibly give thoughtful consideration to every aspect of life changes that may have significant impacts on them. The temporary status of living abroad does not only bring challenges as a student to encounter unfamiliar faces, settings and academic life but also changes the ways they practice intimacy and close friendships. Hence, my study aims to map close friendship practices from the students' perspectives. I examine whether physical distance leads to emotional distance in close friendships or enables new forms of intimacy. In this chapter, I discuss intimacy as a theoretical framework that foregrounds the debates in my study. I also draw on the theoretical framework of intimacy from a Malaysian perspective and explain the relation between intimacy, close friendships and mobility abroad.

In this chapter, I outline some dominant theoretical stories about intimacy, close friendships and living temporarily abroad. This chapter provides an overview of

the study focusing on the existing and recent literature on the sociology of friendship, intimacy and family practices as well as digital media, using research from media and cultural studies. This overview links with the work on the transformation of personal relationships which have been much debated in noteworthy studies (Allan 1989; 2001; Giddens 1992; Jamieson 1999; 2011; 2013). The literature review provides a framework to my study and raises questions that offer more insights into intimacy and friendship studies. As most of the studies discussed in this chapter are from the West, it is significant to also focus on Malaysian cultural norms to excavate potential debates around intimacy and close friendship in Asian and Malaysian perspectives. Until recently, there has been little discussion about intimacy and close friendship in relation to gender, cultural and religious practices. For the most part, my research suggests that, for the population studies – Malaysian students in the UK – there have been significant changes regarding the practices of intimacy in close friendships in the context of living temporarily abroad.

This introductory chapter consists of three sections focusing on key themes that emerged from the literature: Framing Friendship and Intimacy, Intimacy Practices of Family and Friends and Students Mobility Abroad: Distance and Proximity. In the first section, I highlight the theoretical framework of friendship and intimacy. While in the second section, I discuss intimacy as a practice and examine the connection between family practices, as well as gender, culture and religion with close friendships' practices, based on Malaysian as well as western perspectives. In the third section, I discuss students' mobility abroad and focus on the sense of familiarity and 'home'. The significance of co-national

friends, the transformation of intimacy practices as well as the use of social media in connecting people and its impact on the closeness of friendship ties are discussed in this section.

## **FRAMING FRIENDSHIP AND INTIMACY**

In my study, I asked the students about their practices and how they define their own close friendships. In order to frame my study, the first section of this introductory chapter discusses the theoretical framework of friendship and intimacy. Based on previous studies, I unfold the concept of friendship and intimacy in sociological debates and extend these to the context of living temporarily abroad, to underpin my discussions in the succeeding chapters. In this section, I describe friendship based on its characteristics and categorisations. The characteristics of friendship include the debates on chosen and given relationships, as well as homophily in the patterns of friendship. What follows is a discussion and conceptualisation of intimacy. I explain intimacy from the perspective of sociology and draw on the discussions about the transformation of intimacy and its practices.

### **What is Friendship?**

My study seeks to examine the practices of close friendship based on the experiences of Malaysian students living abroad. I draw on the intimacy and cultural practices from a Malaysian perspective. Most of the previous friendship studies are from the West and pay attention to friendship, together with other social issues, such as gender and sexuality (Bank and Hansford 2000; Cronin

2015b; Gillespie et al. 2015; Gillespie et al. 2014; Migliaccio 2009; Migliaccio 2014; Walker 1994) as well as intimacy and cultural practices (Blatterer 2016; Budgeon 2006; Cronin 2015a; Jamieson 2005; Jamieson 2011; Lambert 2013; Policarpo 2016; Shelton et al. 2010). However, a specific definition for the concept of friendship remains a challenging problem because there appears to be no single agreed one.

In a sociological perspective, some scholars define friendship based on its characteristics, such as whether it is voluntary, reciprocal or homophylic (Allan 1989, 2011; Mcpherson et al. 2001; Morimoto and Yang 2013), whereas other scholars conceptualise friendships by creating categories of friendship based on their empirical data, which include the hierarchy of intimacy and style of friendships (Gillespie et al. 2014; Policarpo 2016; Spencer and Pahl 2006). I emphasise the concept of friendship based on sociological debates in the previous studies and bring attention to the concept of friendship in my study of students' experiences of living temporarily abroad.

I came across the notion of 'given' and 'chosen' relationships in the previous western studies, which frame friendship as an 'achieved' and 'chosen' relationship, and family as a 'given' one (Spencer and Pahl 2006; Pahl and Pevalin 2005; Pahl and Spencer 2004). Allan (1989, p.17), as one of the experts in personal relationship studies, notes in his prior work that friendship is an "informal and personal relationship". In another study, Allan (1998) claims that people are neither forced to form a friendship tie nor to follow a set of formal and structural rules in practising friendship. He defines friendship as a

relationship that involves reciprocity, trust and mutual self-disclosure in a range of interaction. However, he also argues that friendship is tacitly shaped and influenced by social structures and cultural norms so this suggests it may not be entirely voluntary. He argues that this characteristic is not explicitly evident to describe friendship ties, as friendship is tacitly shaped and influenced by social structures and cultural norms.

According to Allan (1989), commitment, obligations, material circumstances and existing relationships encourage or limit the chances for a person to meet new friends. Indeed, in his recent work, Allan (2011) talks about the ways in which social roles, status and structural location control daily routines and experiences that affect a person's sociability. He claims that age group, gender, ethnicity and location influence the ways friendships are formed and maintained; and that forms of conversation and activities in friendships are culturally diverse (Allan 2011, p.1). He also argues that friendship is a relationship that involves reciprocity, trust and mutual self-revelation in a range of interactions. However, friendship is not only a personal matter because personal networks, such as family members, can encourage or discourage friendship formation.

I contend that the definition of friendship can be further extended, and depends on individual experiences and socialisation, as well as social structure. We tend to say that we choose our friends, although friendship is actually formed and influenced by social structure (Allan 2011). I found that status homophily which includes ethnicity, religion, age and nationality, as well as value homophily, based on values, attitudes, and beliefs also influence the formation and

practices of friendship, as discussed by Mcpherson et al. (2001) in their study of homophily in social networks. Indeed, social status and values set the limits of normative freedom in friendship practices. Consistent with Allan (2011), Blatterer (2013) argues that the freedom to construct and maintain a friendship is embedded in structural and cultural contingencies. Gender is one of the 'embedded freedom' as argued by Blatterer (2013, p.445) as there is a cultural barrier to heterosexual cross-gender friendships.

Similarly, Morimoto and Yang (2013) claim that the formation of friendships is not only based on homophily or similar social characteristics and interest, but it also depends on the social situations which may vary for different people. Sharing the same experiences, tasks as well as social and physical space, such as neighbourhood (Felmlee 2006; Jamieson et al. 2006; Mcpherson et al. 2001), schools (Oswald and Clark 2003; Burgess et al. 2011; Ko and Buskens 2011) and workplace (Cronin 2014a; Rumens 2017) give either advantages or limitations for people to meet and choose their friends. Previous studies claimed that physical and social space appear to have significant impacts on friendship formation. Accordingly, I argue that the students who move from Malaysia to the UK and experience a different social setting due to their temporary status of living abroad might encounter changes in their friendship practices. The context of living temporarily abroad is crucial to my study.

It is important to highlight that Spencer and Pahl define friendship based on different categorisations of personal relationships. In their studies (see Spencer and Pahl 2006; Pahl and Spencer 2004), they argue that personal relationships

are distinguished as given or chosen relationships. Given relationships include people who are related by blood and marriage or shared roles. Whereas, they suggest friendship ties should be formed and developed in voluntary relationships. Nevertheless, they claim that there is a suffusion between family-like and friend-like relationships because some people describe a family member as a best friend and a friend as a sibling.

On that account, they use the term “personal community” (Spencer and Pahl 2006, p.45) to represent the collection of significant personal ties which give structure and meaning to a person’s life, and people with strong links between friends and family, such as mutual friends, neighbours, acquaintances, colleagues and family friends. It is important to highlight that these different categories of friendships are critical to my study. Figure 1.1 below shows that Spencer and Pahl (2006) measure immediacy of friendships by two elements of intimacy practices: the sense of presence and degree of contact.

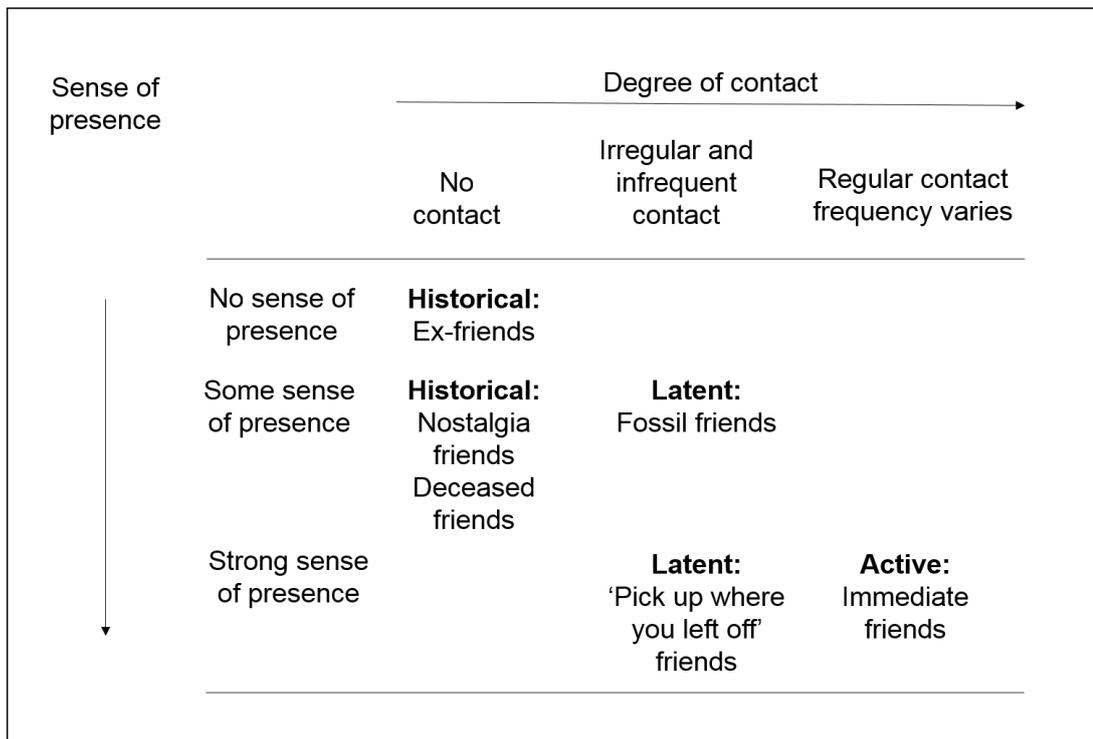


Figure 1.1 The Immediacy of Friendships (Spencer and Pahl 2006, p.74)

Accordingly, Spencer and Pahl (2006) classify friendships into three levels: historical, latent and active. Historical friends are friends that no longer have any contact, and some of these friendships have intentionally ended. Although this kind of friendship is usually excluded from close friendships, they can still maintain a positive presence in people's lives, since the memories of shared experiences in the past have kept the relationships in mind. Latent friends are friends who still have a sense of presence but with whom there is irregular and infrequent contact. There are two types of latent friendships: 'pick up where you left off' and 'fossil' friends (Spencer and Pahl 2006, p.74). There is no necessity to re-establish 'pick up where you left off' friendship as the bond is secure enough to withstand long periods of separation. In contrast, a fossil friendship

needs to be reactivated, or it will gradually end, turning into a historical friendship. Active friends, on the other hand, are immediate friends who are frequently contacted, and who we immediately think of as close friends.

The reasons why some people are considered special depends on the time spent together and the trust that is gained. Moreover, Policarpo (2016) argues that sharing of routines, special life events, experiences, difficult moments in life and significant life transitions in the life course also enable close ties to develop. She claims that close and 'special' friends are usually those who have known each other for many years, and have had enough time to share important knowledge of others through significant emotional events and experiences. For that reason, friendship is usually signified as a combination of time and space, which I consider as deeply connected and substantial in the context in which friendships are embedded. Hence, I use Policarpo's (2016, p.29) argument of time as "a catalyser of intimacy" in my discussion in the following analysis chapters.

It is important to highlight that previous studies show that friendship is not necessarily a chosen relationship as people develop them in certain circumstances. As previously mentioned, as most of the previous studies are from the UK and US, I found that it is crucial to explore the meaning of friendship as well as intimacy practices from a Malaysian perspective. Besides that, it is important to explore whether the suffusion of categorisation between friends and family applies to Malaysian students who live at a distance. From the issues raised in previous studies, my study explores whether social structures and

situations encourage or limit friendship formation as well as intimacy practices, explicitly in the context of living temporarily abroad. In the following chapters, I explain whether previous findings from research studies apply to the Malaysian context.

### **What is Intimacy?**

My study underlines emotional closeness and connectedness from a Malaysian students' perspective of studying overseas. In contrast to psychological approaches that focus on affection and shared knowledge, sociological studies emphasise mutual action and social norms by examining social change and the role of intimacy within it (Forstie 2017). In the West, previous studies frame intimacy in the context of family, gender and sexuality (Blatterer 2016; Clayton 2014; Gabb 2011; Giddens 1992; Morgan 2011a) as well as emotions, distance and technology (Jamieson 2013; Lambert 2015; Miguel 2016). However, my study consists of a more finely grained analysis of intimacy practices and close friendship, rather than a broad-scale account of social change in personal life.

The term 'closeness' appears to be interchangeably used with intimacy, and intimacy is traditionally referred to as physical contact, sex, romance or passionate love, usually with a partner (Gabb 2008; Giddens 1992; Jamieson 1998). Indeed, Forstie (2017) claims that the primary problem to understand intimacy is the conceptual overlap between intimacy and other similar concepts, particularly emotions and community. She argues that intimacy is usually considered as merely another emotion or as "one facet of the emotional glue" that binds people together (p.4). Intimacy also as a concept is interchangeably

used with the concept of community to describe the connection between individuals and groups.

Many sociological debates on friendship have revolved around Giddens' (1992) claims regarding social change and transformation of intimacy. Giddens (1991; 1992) argues that close relationship is the purest form of intimacy. Relationships which have undergone a shift from the ideal of 'romantic' love to that of 'pure' love are an example of this. Indeed, he claims that a 'pure relationship' comes from a trustworthy, authentic and honest one, as well as mutuality in knowledge. Giddens (1992) notes that people achieve a 'pure relationship' through continuous interaction which develops an intimate knowledge of each other's unique and authentic self. The interaction is not placed around the material comforts of household and home, and the relationship maintenance relies only on people's inclination to continue, as a result of their mutual preference.

However, Jamieson (1998,1999) is critical of the 'pure relationship' concept that Giddens draws from his findings. She indicates that people generate intimacy rather than 'disclosing intimacy' in certain situations through the practical acts of giving to, sharing with, knowing of, caring for, feeling the attachment to and spending time with another person (Jamieson 1998, p.8). I consider that intimacy and relationships are more complex than 'pure' or 'disclosing' types of intimacy, as Jamieson (1999; 2013) argues the practical acts of disclosing intimacy are not adequate in developing and sustaining it. Jamieson (1999) also acknowledges that disclosing intimacy is culturally specific, based around

notions of empathy, trust and understanding, and sometimes, loving, caring and sharing rather than close association and privileged forms of knowledge.

Oliker (1998, p.20) defines intimacy as the mutual self of inner experience, sharing of emotional exploration and the expression of attachment. While Forstie (2017) defines intimacy as a distinct social relationship comprised of four elements which are affection, knowledge, mutual action, and norms. Forstie (2017) claims that intimacy is not an achieved state but, rather, it is an active, institutionally mediated process. Stronger or weaker intimate relationships locate themselves in social structures, as legitimate or taboo, and may alter the institutions that render intimacies legible or invisible. In 'stronger' intimacies, affect, knowledge, mutual action, and norms overlap to a significant degree, while in 'weaker' intimacies, the overlap is relatively minor, and the absence of any of the elements indicates an absence of intimacy.

While a variety of definitions have been suggested above, Jamieson's reference of intimacy as "the quality of the close connection between people and the process of building this quality" (2011, p.1) seems relevant to my study. Jamieson (2011) argues that close relationships are a type of subjectively experienced personal relationship and may also be socially recognised as close. The quality of 'closeness' portrayed as intimacy can be emotional and cognitive, with individual experiences, including a feeling of mutual love, like-mindedness and specialness to each other. Jamieson conceptualises intimacy as a specific kind of association characterised by openness, the sharing of thoughts and the expression of feelings, and uses the term 'disclosing intimacy' to speak about

the quality rather than the structure or status of relationships (Jamieson 1999; Jamieson 2005; Jamieson 2011).

Consistent with previous studies (Budgeon 2006; Chambers 2013; Forstie 2017; Jamieson 2011), my study highlights that intimacy might also refer to non-familial and non-sexual relationships, such as friendship, in this context. Jamieson (2011) argues in her study that closeness may also be physical, but intimacy practices in relationships need not be sexual. Indeed, bodily and sexual contact can occur without intimacy. I pay attention to Jamieson's (2011, p.1) argument that “the cultural celebration and use of the term 'intimacy' are not universal, but practices of intimacy are present in all cultures”. It is important to highlight that my study draws on Malaysian cultural and religious practices that are certainly different from the West.

My study highlights the context of students and living temporarily abroad, in which it shows the changes in the ways Malaysian students practice intimacy in a different context. My argument is in line with Holmes (2010) who indicates that people act out emotions in interaction with context and that context helps to shape intimate relationships. Therefore, I discuss the practices of intimacy in the context of gender and religion in the following sections in this chapter to emphasise that intimacy is an ethnocentric concept and the ways in which people define, idealise and practice intimacy are diverse for different people from the various cultural backgrounds.

## **Friendship and Intimacy Practices**

I discovered from my reading of friendship studies that close friendships developed from the ways in which people appreciated and recognised the other's value, strength and weakness, as well as shared experiences and achieved trust in the relationship. However, there are various cultural interpretations of friendship and a distinct level of intensity, intimacy and mutual trust within the general concept of friendship (Allan 1989; Pahl 2000; Rebughini 2011; Silver 1990; Spencer and Pahl 2006). For that reason, my study explores the close friendship practices from a Malaysian perspective in order to discover whether intimacy is an ethnocentric or universal concept as discussed by Jamieson (2011). Friendship and intimacy are built by practices and share some of the component practices such as trust, homophily and reciprocity. Therefore, in this section, I draw on the discussion of trust, homophily and reciprocity as the elements of intimacy practices in close friendship.

I argue that people develop a close relationship when they acquire trust in the relationships. Trust is a knowledge of 'real self' that friends should have about each other. Giddens (1992) argues that trust and honesty cannot be separated to understand friendship. He contends that people attain trust by developing close relationships; mutual openness, self-disclosure, the display of authenticity and emotional honesty define what it means to be a close friend. Similarly, Silver (1989, p.275) claims that friendship is the way in which people establish trust. He argues that people act upon friendship based on their knowledge of each other when they established trust in each other. Moreover, Rebughini

(2011) argues that trust in friendship means being supportive and not disappointing others when needed. She also claims that trust is established in friendships when people witness each other's emotions, as people tend to disclose their secrets and weaknesses to trusted friends.

For that reason, broken trust in friendships produces ontological insecurity in which individuals no longer feel safe and stable whereas close friendships acquire ontological security – the feeling of safety and stability in how others understand our true selves, in which getting to know others allows individuals to get to know more about themselves (Smart et al. 2012). Bilecen (2014) in her study of international students' mobility abroad argues that trust and reciprocity are essential not only in developing and sustaining close friendships, but also in financial support practices. Although the international students in her study did not usually engage in financial exchanges with friends, they expressed their perception of support and security that their friends would be there for them if needed (Bilecen 2014, p.73). Based on the debates in previous studies in the West (Bilecen 2014; Cronin 2014; Policarpo 2016; Spencer and Pahl 2006), I consider that trust, the length of friendship, as well as reciprocity, are substantial in producing intimacy. I emphasise the significance of acquired knowledge as well as the shared experiences and emotional events in close friendships in my analysis chapter.

In the context of living temporarily abroad, the notion of homophily is important to understand the friendship and intimacy practices in my study. McPherson et al. (2001) argue that homophily, liking others who are seen to be similar to

oneself, usually helps in the formation of a friendship, as a result of shared gender, ethnicity, or socially established characteristics that lead people to identify with each other. My study explores the ways in which homophily, regarding gender, religion, nationality and social space strengthen or weaken the close friendship. It is important to recognise that people tend to befriend people who share similarities regarding physical and social characteristics (Mcpherson et al. 2001; Mesch 2000), such as age, gender, education level and ethnicity, and also people who share the same interests, hobbies, and activities. Moreover, cultural homophily is reported as significant in the formation of friendship for people who are living abroad, as discussed in previous studies (Beech 2016; Vogtle and Windzio 2016).

I consider that reciprocity and mutual disclosure of intimate information develops trust and liking between friends. However, Bilecen (2014, p.71) argues that supportive practices among friends are carried out according to the “norm of generalised reciprocity” which refers to both altruistic exchanges and expectation. She claims that people are expected to return a favour in friendship and by doing so, they could deepen and strengthen their relationships. Moreover, Johnson (2008) argues that the intimacy in friendship may decline if people betray mutual trust and close friendships may vanish when individuals have infrequent contact with each other. In my study, I found that social interaction with close friends can take place in various ways and regular contact can improve emotional connectedness in friendship. Furthermore, Felmlee (2006) suggests that the quantity or amount of contact with friends is important because friendships are voluntary relationships and unsatisfactory ones can be

dropped. Hence, I observed that friends who have regular contact usually sustain their friendship longer than friends who rarely meet each other.

Regular contact may not be face-to-face. In a study by Becker et al. (2009), young people who live abroad are reported to use media-based communication to sustain friendship ties due to geographical factors. With the advance of technology, media-based interaction seems to be a significant way to keep connected with people of all ages, both at home and abroad. In my study, I found that the interaction on social media is important in long-distance (LD) friendships and I discuss the debates about the ways in which social media are connecting people at a distance in the last section of this chapter. Friendship appears to become more critical in people's lives as more traditional bonds between kin and couples significantly change (Holmes and Greco 2011). I do not emphasise the social changes in personal life in general, as my study focuses particularly on close friendship practices but family practices and the ways in which people practice intimacy in cultural and religious contexts appear significant in my study. Hence, I discuss family, gender and religious practices in the next section.

### **MAPPING INTIMACY PRACTICES IN FRIENDSHIP**

This section of the thesis discusses the practices of close friendship by looking at other remarkable debates of intimacy practices. I divide this section into three parts to explain the significance of family, gender and religious practices in close friendship practices. The discussion on intimacy and cultural practices in this

section frames the question of my study: to what extent do Malaysian cultural norms and religious beliefs construct the ways in which Malaysian students practice intimacy in close friendships?

I highlight three critical arguments deriving from previous studies. First, people idealise intimacy as a caring, meaningful and intimate relationship similar to qualities associated with family practices. Second, men and women have different patterns and ways of practising friendships. Third, culture and religion shape gender and friendship practices. As I examine close friendship and intimacy practices from a Malaysian perspective, I found that it is significant to focus on the debates of family, gender and religion as practices. One of the crucial arguments in my study is that the ways in which people 'do' intimacy in close friendship are mirrored by the ways in which they 'do' family, gender and religion. However, far too little attention has been paid to the discussion of the relationship between them. Therefore, I discuss family practices, gender role ideologies as well as religious obligations in this section, based on findings from the West, as well as from a Malaysian perspective.

### **Family Practices**

My study draws the attention to the 'practices' of intimacy as well as the context of living temporarily abroad. To understand intimacy practices, I found that it is useful to explore the concept of family practices in this section. Intimacy is often associated with family practices, in which families are ideally created through a set of caring and intimate relationships, as claimed in the previous studies in

the West (Gabb 2008; Roseneil and Budgeon 2004). Family practices can be either strongly or weakly bounded, so that, a non-related person may be treated as 'part of the family' or not (Morgan 2011b, p.81). Family practices consist of all the ordinary, normal and everyday practices and interactions that people do with the intention to have some effect on another family member (Finch 2007; Millar and Ridge 2013; Morgan 2011a). Gabb (2008) conceptualises family as an affectionate space of intimacy. Intimate practices in the family are materialised around quality time, affectionate interaction and bodily intimacy. Gabb (2008) points out that ordinary activities, such as household chores and errands, eating dinner together, watching television or having family chats are perceived as intimate time. Indeed, she considers that care and affection in daily family practices allow mutual disclosure and embodied emotion exchange that helps to strengthen family relationships. However, Gabb (2008) argues that the meanings and experiences of intimacy are different for various historical and cultural backgrounds.

It is important to highlight that the discussion in my study focuses on 'family practices' and not on the types of families. The concept of 'practices' used by Morgan (2011b), distinguishes it from ideals. He suggests that practices are something more routine or habitual in which social action or 'the way we have always done things' (Morgan 2011b, p.163) create some activities, spaces and times as 'family'. As family practices are focused on everyday practicalities, Morgan (2011a) argues that people reproduce sets of relationships by the ways in which they carry out their daily activities and give meaning to these activities. Indeed, he considers that there is an expected circularity between practices and

the sets of other individuals and relationships within which these practices are defined.

Morgan (2011a) takes 'friendship' into consideration and argues that in daily practices, a normal friend turns into a particular friend depending on the activities, thoughts, as well as expectations that give meaning to the friendship. Moreover, Morgan (2011b, p.88) claims that daily family practices, such as mealtimes, bedtimes, celebrations and visits, create or recreate a sense of time and space. These practices re-affirm the symbolic and imaginary sense of what home is about (Morgan 2011b). I argue that the sense of home and familiarity in family practices should be discussed in other contexts, particularly in the context of living temporarily abroad. For that reason, in Chapter Five, my study explores the sense of home and the significance of familiarity in the practices of close friendships for Malaysian students living abroad.

Indeed, Spencer and Pahl (2006) argue that friend-like or given-as-chosen ties and family-like or chosen-as-given ties represent the suffusion of categorisation of family and friends. In Figure 1.2 below, Spencer and Pahl (2006) indicate that there are two elements of the suffusion process that blur the boundaries of family and friends: the nature of the bond and the nature of the interaction.

	Friends		Family
<b>The nature of the bond</b>			
Choice	A chosen relationship	← becoming more family-like becoming more friend-like →	An ascribed or given relationship
Responsibility	Cannot expect friends to feel a sense of duty or obligation	becoming more family-like →	Expect family to feel a sense of duty or obligation
Importance	Importance linked to quality of relationship	becoming more family-like →	Importance taken for granted
Continuity	Friendship not necessarily expected to last indefinitely	becoming more family-like →	Family relationship expected to continue and to survive 'ups and downs'
Affection	Expect to like friends	← becoming more friend-like becoming more family-like →	Expect to love family
<b>The nature of the interaction</b>			
Practical help	Practical help given by some friends but not necessarily expected	becoming more family-like →	Expect family to provide practical help
Emotional support	Emotional help given by some friends but not necessarily expected	becoming more family-like →	Expect family to give emotional support
Confiding	Expect to confide in close friends	← becoming more friend-like	Confiding in family can be problematic
Companionship and fun	Taken for granted that friends will have fun	← becoming more friend-like	Fun with family not expected

Figure 1.2 The Suffusion Process (Spencer and Pahl 2006, p.114)

Spencer and Pahl (2006) suggest that friends become more family-like when people expect to feel a sense of duty or obligation, to continue and to survive ups and downs, to love, as well as to provide practical help and emotional support. Conversely, family becomes more friend-like when people expect to confide in family members and have fun with them without feeling obliged to do so. Based on Spencer and Pahl's (2006) argument, I consider care and affection in family practices as the 'qualities of intimacy' that shape the ways in which the students idealise and practice intimacy in their close friendships.

Allan (2008) is critical of the concept of suffusion, and argues that the language of friendship is drawn on to emphasise the exceptional quality of a given kin tie, while the language of kinship is used to highlight the strength of particular non-

kin ties and differentiate them from other relationships. He claims that people calling a sister a best friend is not to deny the family connection but to highlight the strong ties that exist more than siblings would typically be expected to have. For that reason, I put attention on the debates of suffused relationships between friends and family, in my study, to answer the question of whether the students perceive family members as friends and friends as family members due to obligation, emotional connectedness or merely because of the issues of language.

As intimacy is usually framed in a Euro-North-American ethnocentric way (Jamieson 2011), it is vital to direct our attention to the family practices of intimacy in the Asian context. Focusing on Malaysian family practices, Abdullah et al. (2008) and Noor (1999) in their studies indicate that urban Malay and Chinese women in Malaysia still follow the traditional and patriarchal roles that are in line with cultural and religious values. Even though nowadays more women are educated and actively involved in economics and political activities, the idea of the man as the breadwinner and head of the household and the woman as the homemaker who takes care of the children and does the housework is still applied in Malaysian family practices. As masculinity has a hegemonic or dominant status in Malaysia as described above, most gender studies in Malaysia focus on the concept of masculinity instead of femininity.

I emphasise the Malaysian values and belief system in family practices to understand the close friendship practices in my study. Cultural differences in gender roles and conflicting notions of intimacy within individualist and

collectivist ideals are presumed to differentially influence self-disclosure and emotional expressiveness (Clayton 2014; Marshall 2008). Keshavarz and Baharudin (2012) indicate that Malaysian parents from the three ethnic groups – Malay, Chinese and Indian, practice authoritarian parenting more than individualist parenting though argue that the parents in their study did not entirely reject the Western values of intimacy in family practices. Indeed, Malaysian parents continue to emphasise values, such as unity, sharing and caring for others in their family, although they uphold traditional norms of collectivist values in family practices such as interdependence, obedience, conformity to the family as well as to the rituals, traditions and religions.

Becher (2008) in her study of family practices in South Asian Muslim families in Britain claims that daily family practices, which include the ways in which they eat, speak, dress and spend their free time, reflect values and a belief system bound up with family practices, which, as well as social norms and expectations, shape daily family practices, especially in parenting style. Religion is typically being described as a 'way of life' offering a whole framework of living including decision making and moral reasoning. Becher (2008) points out the fact that daily family practices reflect the ways in which families 'perform' their religious, social and cultural identities. Indeed, she argues that the physical 'doing' of religion is closely intertwined with the 'doing' of family. Consistent with that argument, I consider in my study that the ways in which Malaysian students do friendship, gender and intimacy are reflected by the ways in which they do religion.

## **Doing Gender, Doing Friendship**

Numerous studies have attempted to explain the differences in men's and women's friendship. It is generally acknowledged that both men and women have different patterns of friendships. I found that previous findings indicate that gender role ideology builds the impression that men are associated with activity-based friendships and instrumental roles, while women are associated with intimate conversation based friendships and expressive roles. A study by Fischer and Oliker (1983) found that the number of friends for both men and women are different at different stages of life. Young single men and women named a similar number of friends, while adult men listed more friends than adult women, and conversely in elderly. Married women were more involved with families, thus, named a lesser number of friends. They also found that gender inequalities associated with career, housework and childbearing and other structural constraints that are faced by people at other stages of life influenced the number of friends. However, previous studies suggest that marriage is either a benefit or barrier for close friendships for both men and women at different stages of life (Allan 1989; Fischer and Oliker 1983; Gillespie et al. 2014; O'Connor 1992).

By using the identical research method in Fischer and Oliker's (1983) study, Gillespie et al.'s (2014; 2015) studies in the US challenge the claims that men and women have distinct styles of friendship and avoids the stereotypes of intimate talk and self-disclosure in women's friendships. They argue that friendship quality is important for heterosexual, gay, lesbian, as well as bisexual

men's and women's life satisfaction. In their study of close adult friendships, Gillespie et al. (2014) indicate that women's and men's friendship patterns as exceptionally similar and not fundamentally gendered, not only regarding number and gender of friends but also in the types of instrumental and expressive support they receive from close friends. Men and women reported having a particular number of close friends who are socially and emotionally available to them and can be depended on. Their study challenges the expectation of same-gender and cross-gender friendships, and found that women did not explicitly depend on other women for intimate disclosure or exclusively upon men for instrumental help, and men did not rely only on women friends for intimate disclosure. Indeed, Gillespie et al. (2014) suggest that same-gender friendships are available to provide a variety types of expressive and instrumental support for both men and women. Therefore, they suggest that the general idea that men and women have different styles of friendship is exaggerated.

Although the differences in the number of friends are not notable for all groups, heterosexual men and women in Gillespie et al.'s (2015) study reported more same-gender than cross-gender friends in contrast to gay, lesbian as well as bisexual men and women. This finding is consistent with O'Meara's (1989) argument that heterosexual men and women feel the need to engage in strategies to demonstrate to others that their friendship with cross-gender friends is not sexual. In contrast to their prior study, Gillespie et al. (2015) indicate men's friendships are usually associated with the availability of tangible help, for example, a call or text if they are in trouble late at night, while women's

friendships revolve around emotional expressiveness and self-disclosure. Indeed, lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual women show greater homophily than men for talking about sex life and in celebrating a birthday, in particular. Gillespie et al. (2015) also argued that the discussion of personal matters with friends is one of the characteristics of close and emotionally intimate friendships. Consequently, men's friendships are less intimate than women's friendships, and this has also been discussed in some previous studies (Bank and Hansford 2000; Felmlee et al. 2012; Migliaccio 2014; Morimoto and Yang 2013).

However, I consider that social norms influence the ways in which men and women seek intimacy in friendship. My study supports Migliaccio's (2009) claim that although men are longing for expressiveness in friendships, they avoided expressive interactions with friends and engaged in more instrumental activities and support due to masculine expectations about men's friendships. Men are certain of the expectation that they should display emotional strength, toughness and inexpressiveness in social situations. For that reason, Migliaccio (2009) argues that the ways in which men are practicing their friendships reflect the ways in which they 'do gender'. In his recent study, Migliaccio (2014) found that there are limitations to the amount of sharing that is allowed in men's friendships, as well as the ways in which it is characterised. Even though most of the male participants perceived the ideal form of intimacy in a more feminine way, they avoided sharing their personal stories and problems with their friends. They still portrayed their friendships as being based on shared interests and activities.

Migliaccio (2014) indicates that all of the men in his study were influenced by masculine expectations in practising their friendships. The reactions from other male friends, usually through the use of humour, restrained the male participants in their study from being too expressive in their interactions. Although the male participants in their study wanted to have more expressive friendships, they were restricted by the unspoken expectations of hegemonic masculinity as discussed by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) and Donaldson (1993), which notably, avoids any association with femininity. They feared a feminine form of friendship and thus evaded any actions that equated with being female, which in this case are sharing and being expressive. For that reason, Migliaccio (2014) argued that friendships were a reflection of masculine acts and men drew a distinction between their friendships with men and women's friendships.

Gendered expectations in doing friendships are portrayed in the ways in which men and women engaged and interacted with their close friends. Although Walker's (1994) account is quite dated, I found that her ideas on the gendered behaviour of men and women in friendship are still relevant. She claims that as gender is an ongoing social construction, men and women do friendship in various ways, and some friendship practices do not conform to gender norms and stereotypes. Despite the fact that men are expected to perform masculine and instrumental gender roles while women play expressive and feminine roles, people actually do something a little bit different from this in doing friendship. In her study she found that some men share feelings more than some women and this varies according to social class. However, she indicates that men and

women accept the gender roles ideology of women's openness and men's activities for two reasons: disapproval by peers of inappropriate gendered behaviour and people not realising the differences between ideologies and behaviour, as they do not reflect on their behaviour. The question of whether gender roles ideology and social norms construct the ways in which people idealise and practise close friendship is answered in the Chapter Three of this thesis.

### **Doing Religion, Doing Friendship**

I consider that the ways in which Malaysian students do friendship, gender and intimacy are reflected in the ways in which they do religion. Consistent with Becher (2008), I argue that a person's values and belief system, as well as social norms and expectations as a 'way of life' shape intimacy practices, especially in the ways in which men and women practice close friendships. Rao (2015) in her study of gender and Muslim converts in the US claims that religious individuals 'do religion' in gendered ways. Even though she focuses mainly on Muslim converts and how they accept religious restrictions around clothing choices and polygyny, her findings are noteworthy in terms of gender and religious practices. It is important to highlight that religious obligations and obedience develop a particular gendered behaviour. By doing religion, Rao (2015) indicates that men and women develop a specific character of responsible masculinity and sacrificial femininity, which follow different religious demands. Her study develops a broader theoretical understanding that men's

and women's construction of the religious moral self is certainly linked to the construction of a gendered moral self.

Rao (2015) argues that people do not just become Muslim, they learn to become Muslim men and women who behave in gendered ways to do religion properly and to become religious subjects. From the Muslims Malaysian perspective, Krauss et al. (2012) argue that social context and family structure shape religiosity among young Muslims in Malaysia. They indicate that parents, as well as school and mosque, play important roles in the religious socialisation of young Muslims. Besides that, they claim that secure attachment in the family from a stable and functional family environment lead to positive religious socialisation. It is also apparent that religious socialisation shapes the ways in which Malaysian people idealise as well as practise gender roles and sexuality. In Malaysia, pre-marital sex and homosexuality are taboo since they conflict with the local culture. In their studies, Muhammad et al. (2016) and Manaf et al. (2014) found that faith in religion as well as religious activities restrict the likelihood of pre-marital sexual activity among young people in Malaysia, either Muslim or non-Muslim, and limit them from intimate cross-gender friendships. Thus, religion seems essential in decision making and moral reasoning.

Moreover, religion shapes the ways in which Malaysian men reflect idealised masculinity. Based on previous studies in Malaysia, I found that men in Malaysia deem masculinity to be a hegemonic status marked by sexual orientation. The recent study on masculinity by Fazli Khalaf et al. (2013) found that Malaysian men identify masculinity in several ways, such as having a good

body shape, romantic or sexual success, financial independence, being respected and being a family man. Moreover, Fazli Khalaf et al. (2013) found that single Malaysian men idealised masculinity in terms of latter, and their views were usually influenced by their religion and opinions gained from their parents' roles, especially the father's.

As mentioned above, homosexuality is considered taboo since it conflicts with the local culture. Goh (2014), in his study of Malaysian Malay-Muslim masculinity identified that all homosexual men are considered to be violating the norms of masculinity and religious obligations, as there are perceptions that all Malay-Muslim men in Malaysia are heterosexual. Therefore, practising intimacy and emotional closeness in male homosocial interactions may lead to the disruption of hegemonic masculinity. My study supports Hammaren and Johansson's (2014) argument that the concepts of love, intimacy and affection have been feminised so that masculinity is still defined as the opposite of femininity and homosexuality.

Armstrong's (1987) study of women's friendship in Malaysia is quite dated but the debates are still significant in my study. She argues that religion helps to strengthen friendship ties among women. Besides their preference for same-gender close friendship, the Malaysian women in her study mentioned that they prefer to have close friends who share a similar way of thinking, common background and beliefs in religion. In addition, Armstrong (1987) found that Muslim women in Malaysia form close ties with other Muslim women through Islamic activities and occasions.

Brown (2009b) discovered that religion is a part of adjustment experience for postgraduate international students in England. She argues that friendships are formed by a shared Muslim faith, and that Muslim students were drawn to develop these friendships as they sought to re-enact the rituals that remind them of home, to reaffirm and celebrate religious identity and to gain support and defence against the threat of Islamophobia (Brown 2009b, p.65). Hence, in the analysis chapter, I highlight the ways in which similar cultural background, values and religion help people to form new friends abroad and ease the adaptation process, specifically for Malaysian students. In the next section, I discuss the issues arising from students' mobility abroad and the usage of social media in connecting the students with family members and friends back home.

### **STUDENTS' MOBILITY ABROAD: DISTANCE AND PROXIMITY**

In this section, I pay attention to debates around distance and proximity in the context of students' mobility abroad, to consider whether physical distance leads to emotional distance in close friendships or enables new forms of intimacy. I explore the impacts of living temporarily abroad with intimacy practices in long-distance (LD) and geographically close (GC) relationships discussed in the previous studies. Most studies of students mobility abroad focus on adaptation and acculturation processes which show co-national friends as well as students' societies as the main support while living abroad (Brown 2009a; Lim and Pham 2016; Menzies and Baron 2014).

Although my study does not focus on the factors of students' mobility, this is a very popular research topic. Beech (2014a; 2014b) indicates that friends and family, as well as place of study, are significant factors for students deciding to study abroad. Indeed, Cebolla-Boado, Hu and Soysal (2018) argue that university prestige is one of the leading factors, besides, in their study, the number of Chinese students in a particular university influenced the Chinese students' university choice abroad. Hence, I explore intimacy practices in the context of living abroad, in this section, which highlights the importance of familiarity, co-national friends and student societies. I go on to discuss the usage of social media in the maintenance of LD close friendships as well as the development of new friendships abroad.

### **Forming Friendship Abroad: Familiarity and the Sense of 'Home'**

Before I came to the UK, I made several contacts with Malaysian students in Lancaster through the Facebook page of Lancaster University Malaysian Students Society. I asked for tips on how to get to the university from Manchester Airport, their advice on what to wear and what to bring from Malaysia, especially food. The fact that other Malaysian students are studying in Lancaster made me, as well as my family members, feel more secure and relieved. Moreover, to know that there is an Asian shop, selling Malaysian food made me feel like I would still be in my home country as I can eat Malaysian cuisine and speak in the Malay language with not only Malaysian friends. I also made lots of Indonesian and Bruneian friends, which reaffirmed my Malay and

Islamic identity (Brown 2009b, p.65) as we speak a similar language and come from a similar cultural background, as well as religion.

Based on my experiences of living temporarily abroad, I discovered that I felt the sense of 'home' when I acquired familiarity with the language, people and situations. My situation is consistent with Prazeres (2016) who indicates that students who live abroad intend to develop a sense of comfort and familiarity in their daily life abroad not only to gain a sense of local belonging but also to form a new 'home' (Prazeres 2016, p.13). She suggests that the feelings and ideas of comfort, familiarity and home are transformed through students' mobility abroad. However, she argues that it is challenging to make the unfamiliar become familiar and the uncomfortable become comfortable in order to fit in with the local environment. Indeed, Lim and Pham (2016, p.2184) argue that the international students may not feel completely welcome in their host countries but may also start to grow feelings of estrangement from their home countries.

It is clear that one of the ways to develop a sense of comfort and familiarity is to form new friendships abroad. Accordingly, Bilecen (2014) and Nielsen (2014) found that international students preferred to befriend those who share a similar nationality, and then, to make friends with other international students and have limited interaction with host students. Consistent with these findings, Maundeni (2001) found that international students had little and 'formal' contact with British students because they are reluctant to initiate contact with them on the assumption that local students are reserved and preferred to socialise with each

other. Indeed, British students played a minimal role in the adjustment process for international students (Maundeni 2001), compared to co-national contact, which becomes more influential over time as co-nationals are important for promoting cultural adjustment and managing stress (Geeraert et al. 2014). I found that the ways in which Coleman (2015) describes international students' friendships as being within a concentric circle in Figure 1.3 below is significant in my study.

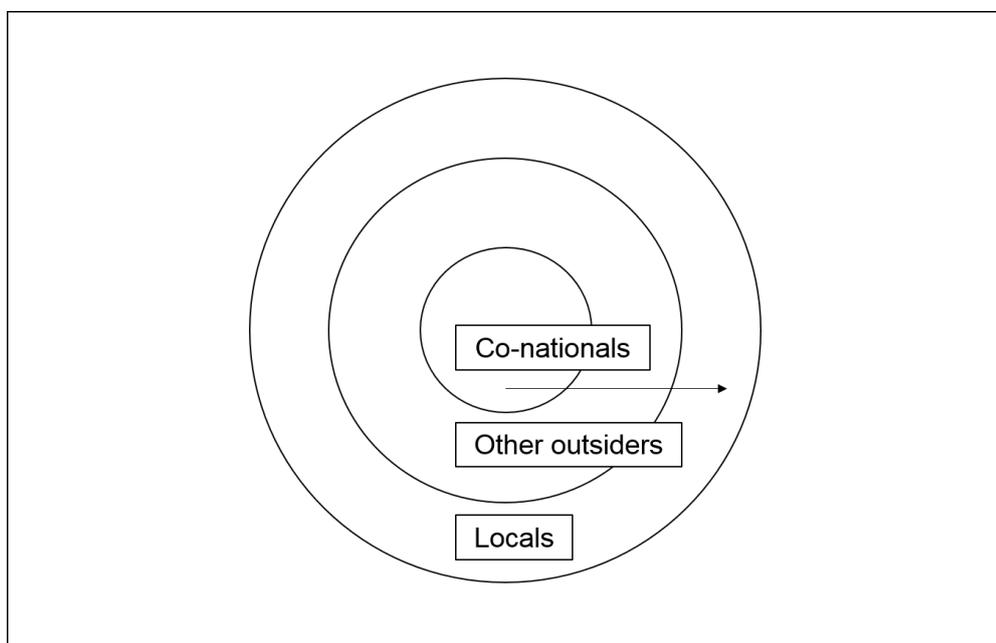


Figure 1.3 International Students' Social Circle (Coleman 2015, p.44)

Coleman (2015) found that the international students begin by socialising with co-nationals and they add other international students to their social circles over time and motivation. The students can include local students depending on particular circumstances, including duration of study abroad as well as their motivations, attitudes, actions and initiatives (Coleman 2015, p.44). Moreover,

Coleman (2015) claims that each circle does not replace another. Instead the process is additive. The circle is broadening across time and shows the progression of friendship. Indeed, Nielsen (2014) discovered that shared social space, such as accommodation, classes, services and societies on campus that develop activities for international students foster intercultural interaction. However, she points out that local students rarely participate in those activities. Therefore, the international students have fewer opportunities to develop close contact with local students compared to co-national and other international friends.

Ngow (2013) also reported that students' friendship groups are usually defined by nationality. She indicates that most of the students in her study – whether locals or international students – only mix with friends who share a similar background and prefer not to socialise with other friends because of 'cultural difference'. This trend is by some means related to the concept of 'homophily', as discussed earlier in this chapter. A notable study on homophily and friendship by Kandel (1978) indicates that homogenous behaviours and attitudes influence interpersonal attraction that sustain friendships ties. As Malaysia is a multicultural society, with Malays, Chinese, Indians and the indigenous people, my study explores whether cultural difference has a significant impact on friendship choices and discovers the factors that influence Malaysian students' friendships with local students or other international students.

In their study of Malaysian and Indonesian students in Jordan, Alazzi and Al-Jarrah (2016) claim that leaving family responsibilities, expectations of academic performance as well as unfamiliar cultural norms, language, friends and food lead to stress and anxiety of living away from home. They indicate that personal, academic, sociocultural and problem-solving strategies are four main concerns encountered by Malaysian and Indonesian students while living in Jordan (Alazzi and Al-Jarrah 2016, pp.735–737). The students not only faced challenges of time management and academic achievement, but they also reported feelings of loneliness and homesickness as they did not fit in with the norms, languages and food. However, Weiss and Ford (2011) in their study of Malaysian, Indonesian and Singaporean students in Australia claim that living temporarily abroad seems likely to strengthen rather than weaken national identity. The students tend to take part in country-specific students' society, as there is a Malaysian Student Association in each Australian university.

Although co-national friends are important for international students, it is surprising that Malay students have fewer interactions and close ties with Malaysians from different ethnic backgrounds while studying abroad (Ahmad et al. 2014; Weiss and Ford 2011). Weiss and Ford (2011) found that although Malay students formed more friendships with Chinese and Indian friends than they had in Malaysia, friends from other ethnic backgrounds remained a relatively small part of their close friendships as Malays tend to speak Malay among themselves and tend to speak in English with Chinese and Indian friends. In this case, language use is the main problem as Weiss and Ford (2011) argue that speaking English underpinned the sense of 'otherness' of non-Malays,

leading to less intimate interaction between Malay students and other Malaysian students from the different ethnic background, while abroad. Similar to findings from the West, Alazzi and Al-Jarrah (2016) point out that the Malaysian students in Jordan preferred to interact with co-national friends or other international students who had the same language, culture and beliefs. They found that the students sought emotional support from co-national and Southeast Asian friends rather than local students. From the debates above, it is clear to highlight that familiarity and a sense of home seem significant for students abroad.

Bauman (2003) claims that friendship is easily broken due to geographical distance. As the face-to-face meeting is not possible due to the geographical mobility, people who live at-a-distance are faced with the challenges to remain physically and emotionally connected. According to Giddens (1992), people change the ways they act and behave when they face unfamiliar routines and situations. When the normal routines are no longer applicable, they need to change their actions based on the actual situation. In relation to my study, the changes of routines due to geographical mobility have changed the ways in which Malaysian students practice intimacy in close friendships. I found Törrönen and Maunu's (2011, p.4) concept of 'emotional episodes' relevant to my study. They argue that the emotions experienced during episodes of interaction can alter and change the ways in which people reflect upon emotions. As each episode develops, people experience diverse ways of conveying and receiving emotions and modify their action and responses based on these emotional experiences (Törrönen and Maunu 2011). In my study, I argue that changes in demographics, family relationship, divorce and mobility make

friendship become more significant in people's lives. Hence, I draw my attention on how living temporarily abroad transforms close friendship and answer the question of whether people become emotionally distant when they lack care and concern about their friendship, and whether social media significant in connecting people while abroad, in the next section.

### **Social Media Connecting People**

As I have mentioned earlier about the formation of new friendship abroad, I contacted other Malaysian students through the Facebook page of the Malaysian Students' Society to gain information and advice prior to arriving in Lancaster. I found that making contacts through social media is one of the intimate acts that helped to develop my close friendships with Malaysian friends in Lancaster. My study shows that social media is significant in the adaptation process of living temporarily abroad. Consistent with Ahmad et al. (2014), I agree that the internet and social media assist the Malaysian students during pre-departure; help them to learn about the university, local places and transportations; as well as to establish new contacts with other Malaysian students there. Moreover, Ahmad et al. (2014) claim that with the advancement of technology, Malaysian students may sometimes feel like they have not left their homeland and cultural norms when they are actually living abroad. Social media allows face-to-face interaction that takes place online which helps the students to stay connected with family and friends back home, as well as to get updated with Malaysian news and entertainment. However, Sandel (2014) claims that by not going online and interacting with family and friends at home,

students are more able to blend into the life abroad. Hence, the question of whether one really leaves their country when they are abroad is raised by Ahmad et al. (2014) and whether social media helps or hinders the adaptation process of living abroad, as argued by Sandel (2014), seem significant to be answered in my study. I draw on these debates later in the analysis chapter of this thesis.

Even though I had not established a close friendship with other Malaysian students before arrival, my research shows that social media is a significant platform of intimate interaction for international students. Indeed, this is consistent with recent studies based on Granovetter's (1973) work on 'the strength of weak ties', which indicates that weak ties in online interaction are useful in spreading information and linking with the diverse network (Ellison et al. 2011; Chen 2013). I discover that the changing nature of friendships due to the advancement of technologies from face-to-face interaction to a phone call, short message service (SMS), email, instant messenger, chat rooms and social media has raised attention for sociological studies. The development of communication technologies has facilitated and shaped social interaction and friendship practices, as well as allowing the sense of connection that is significant in students' adjustment to living abroad (Sandel 2014).

For that reason, my study explores the ways in which Malaysian students practice intimacy in close friendships using social media while living abroad. Moreover, there is little existing research on Malaysian practices of friendship in social media. Most of the studies are implicitly focused on the formation of

inter-ethnic as well as new online friendships. Similar to the debates of online friendship formation in the West (Boyd 2010; Brickell 2012; Davies 2011), young people in Malaysia also form new friendships and add existing contacts in face-to-face interaction on social media, and use various types of the communication medium to strengthen their friendships (Nurullah 2008; Baboo et al. 2013). Baboo et al. (2013) indicate that Malaysian young people have the freedom to choose their online friends, although some are introduced by their existing friends. Moreover, frequency of contact, loneliness and self-disclosure are the main factors of friendship formation in social media (Nurullah 2008). Different types of communication medium, such as instant messenger, social media and email help people to have frequent interactions with friends. Baboo et al. (2013) argue that Malaysian young people use various types of internet-mediated communication to keep connected with family and friends, to plan their activities together, updating news and talking about their lives with each other, and solving their friendship problems.

Social media allows people to maintain pre-existing friends, befriend strangers with similar interests, find LD or lost-contacted friends and also have a chance to get to know much more about their offline acquaintances when they are listed as friends in social media (Boyd, 2010). However, it is important to highlight that my study does not exclusively focus on the formation and maintenance of all friends and followers on social media. I look at the practices of intimacy in a particular group of new and long-established close friendships and explore the development of close friendship based on the act of intimacy. In my study, I emphasise the formation and maintenance of close friendship and particularly

focus on the usage of social media as a tool in the context of living temporarily abroad. I pay attention to the ways in which people established friendships and interacted in two intertwined social settings, which are face-to-face and online.

Social media has become embedded in people's routine and lifestyle, with young people being the most frequent users of emails, social media sites and instant messenger (Boyd 2010; Chambers 2013). I argue that social media provide tools for networking especially for establishing new friendships and at the same time maintaining existing relationships. As a medium of social interaction and information sharing, I draw my attention to how social media produces particular forms of intimacy and gets mixed with offline interaction. According to Davies (2011) social media act as a supplement for existing ways of social interactions, such as face to face, letters and conventional phone calls, for people to perceive and manage their contacts. I found that social media allows new social practices in interaction. Moreover, social roles, status and structural location do not have a significant impact on friendship formation and practices on social media. Social media allows people to form friendships, to interact and do friendships without the necessity of face-to-face contact or any social and physical boundaries. However, as Boyd (2010) and Davies (2011) point out, people need to be connected to the internet and mutually agree to becoming a friend, by accepting a friend request in social media.

It is important to highlight that social media have formed a new etiquette for how friendship is done, and at the same time show the ways in which people manage existing friendships or deal with unwanted friends (Holmes 2011; Jamieson

2013; McLaughlin and Vitak 2011). As Boyd (2010) argues in her research, social media allows users to connect, build and manage their friends by a process of negotiating the social practices and norms. Social media users usually follow a set of shared social practices for 'friending' that are accepted by online communities. Moreover, people have differentiated relationships and respect these differences, as well as having some clear boundaries of obligations in their friendships as argued by Pahl (2000). People have separate friends for conversation on social media depending on particular interest and activities, and the closeness of friendship can be measured on the quality of content and frequency of interaction (Boyd 2010).

However, Hall and Baym (2011) indicate that excessive contact with friends can increase expectations of relationship maintenance and dependence that also triggers dissatisfaction with friendships. Moreover, LD relationships have to deal with higher expectations and miscommunication. Cantó-Milà et al. (2016) argue that online interaction has become part of the 'imagined dreams' in which people imagine the reaction from a text message and they picture that the other person is ideally there for them, interested and caring about what they have to say. However, as social media allows daily interaction, it has changed the expectations of intimacy practices and created a certain pressure to communicate (Jurkane-Hobein 2015). According to Jamieson (2013) new technologies bring new burdens of expectation within friendships as people are accused of not being interested in interacting if they do not appropriate response to their friends' updates on social media. For that reason, people need

to follow a set of social practices that are expected and accepted, to avoid dissatisfied relationships.

Holmes (2011) states that users need to reflect on their friends' feeling in a similar way as offline and manage their self-disclosure and behaviour appropriately within a particular interaction context, as online friends also include family members, colleagues and a variety of peers. The diversity of social relations on social media needs new emotional demands as users need to think, feel and act appropriately to keep the intimacy of relationships and at the same time to avoid embarrassment and defriending. Holmes (2011) also indicates that the rules of friendship on social media generally follow those of the offline context especially on how to behave and expectations on conducting a friendship.

Spencer and Pahl (2006) acknowledge that the focus of studies of friendships and new communication technologies is mainly on the strength of friendship. People usually use phone calls and SMS to get an immediate responses from close friends regarding daily activities or personal matters (Taylor and Harper 2003), use chat rooms and dating sites to find new friends and partners (Brickell 2012), and use email for formal interaction and to keep in touch with LD friends (Lenhart et al. 2007). People who live at a distance tend to use social media rather than calling to connect with their friends and family. The reason is because meeting up, sharing physical space and spending time together are some of the challenges in LD close friendships (Cronin 2014b; Policarpo 2016). With free voice call, video call and chats, people who are living away from each

other can keep in touch with friends and family at any time as long as they are connected to the internet.

Furthermore, living away from home makes real-time or synchronous conversation as well as face-to-face meeting impossible. However, social media allow a new form of face-to-face meeting through video calls, whether on Facebook, Skype or any instant messenger that allow this function. Sandel (2014) indicates, in his study, that Skype and other video calls technologies fostered a sense of immediacy and shrank the sense of distance to alleviate pressure and feelings of homesickness that can arise when a student is alone and far from home. Moreover, Chambers (2013, p.118) argues that video calls give the illusion of co-presence as it allows participation in a family gathering, for example, since it is synchronous and dialogic. Social media give a chance for people to feel the sense of presence and social support even though they are separated.

In addition, social media offers affective richness due to their provision of colourful and graphic emoji and stickers. Lim and Pham (2016) claim that social media users can use the emoji and stickers to enliven their messages and to inject them with fun and feeling. According to Baym (2010) digital formats of social cues, such as emoticons, caps lock as well as photos and videos, enable the users to capture emotional nuance, convey friendliness, build intimacy, express strong emotions and recreate familiarity. Nevertheless, social media provides reduced social cues and cannot recreate physical touch. Although Skype and other video chat applications offer many social cues including voice

and facial expression, Baym (2010) argues that there are limitations to intimacy practices through interaction via video call, including lack of ability to touch and smell.

From these points, my study raises a question of whether lack of social cues on social media lead to less intimate interaction and friendship. Baym (2010) argues that lack of social cues and the asynchronicity of online interaction does not break close relationships. Instead, asynchronous interaction not only allows people to revise and to reply when they like, but it also has discouraged the 'sense of placelessness' (Baym 2010, p.8). On the contrary, Stets and Turner (2014) argue that as social emotions can be controlled and less visible in social media, people cannot convey their emotions through textual and visual content. Consequently, they will feel less intimate or emotionally connected with friends through their interaction. I draw on these argument in my study and explore the significance of face and voice in the intimacy practices in the analysis chapter of this thesis.

## THE STRUCTURE OF THIS THESIS

This thesis consists of six chapters which are Chapter One Introduction and Literature Review, Chapter Two *Methodology*, Chapter Three *Gender Practices in Close Friendships*, Chapter Four *Ideal Qualities of Intimacy and 'Familiarity as a Family'*, Chapter Five *Distance is a New Closeness*, and finally Chapter Six *Conclusion*. The other sections include the Bibliography and Appendices. My research is focused on Malaysian students in the UK, exploring their experiences of living abroad as well as their practices of intimacy in close friendships. It is important to highlight the research questions that I am investigating in this study before discussing the outline of my thesis. The research questions were developed through my reading of previous studies, as well as the preliminary data of the pilot study. Three research questions that I present in this study are:

- i. To what extent do Malaysian cultural norms and religious beliefs construct the ways in which Malaysian students practice intimacy in close friendships?
- ii. To what extent does the context of living abroad influence the intimacy practices in geographically long-distance and close-distance close friendships?
- iii. To what extent does physical distance lead to emotional distance in close friendships or enable new forms of intimacy?

In Chapter Two *Methodology*, I go on to explore some of the methodological challenges of researching intimacy practices in close friendships – challenges which cannot be separated from the conceptual stories of the first chapter. I outline the methodology used to undertake this project and describes the rationale behind the choice and design of the particular methods in this study. Three qualitative methods that I use in this study are friendship maps, digital diaries and in-depth interviews. This chapter explains how these methods are appropriate both for the theoretical underpinnings of the social research and for looking at friendship practices, in particular. This chapter also elucidates the processes of recruiting students for the empirical research, and details the demographic make-up of the participants, who are Malaysian undergraduate and postgraduate taught students that are in the UK for the first time, alone and unmarried. This chapter also explains the ethical considerations that I took into account in my choice, and how I made sure to gather informed consent from my participants. I also reflect on my role as a researcher, and the ways in which I was positioned within the project.

Chapter Three *Gender Practices in Close Friendships* acknowledges men's and women's friendships as well as the gendered patterns in close friendships. In this first analysis chapter, my debates on the students' cultural and religious practices provide the critical insights into the ways in which these practices built gender and intimacy practices in doing close friendships. I look at the fear of intimacy especially in men's close friendships and the impact of gender role ideologies on the expectation of instrumental and expressive close friendships. Besides that, I address the ways in which religious practices limit the intimate

acts and influence the emotional connectedness in cross-gender friendships. I also explore the patterns of Malaysian students' close friendship by describing the number of close friends, the hierarchy of friends and intimacy, cross-gender close friendship, as well as partners as close friends.

In Chapter Four *Ideal Qualities of Intimacy and 'Familiarity as a Family'*, I explore the intimacy practices of Malaysian students with their long-established and new close friends. Long-established friends, are friends who were known to the participants before they came to the UK, including family members, childhood friends, school and college mates, while new friends are mostly co-national friendships formed in the UK. In this chapter, I analyse my data that represent the themes of family practices, suffused relationships of friends and family, the sense of belonging, as well as shared space and activities. I discover the ideal intimacy qualities acquired in long-established close friendships, and I look at the noticeable differences regarding the formation and practices of intimacy in long-established and new close friendships. This analysis chapter also focuses on a new form of intimacy practices in co-national friendships, and I suggest a new concept of 'familiarity as a family' that foregrounds this discussion.

Chapter Five *Distance is a New Closeness* draws on the practices of intimacy and emotional connectedness in face-to-face and online interaction. I look at the patterns of interaction via face-to-face and social media, based on three-week friendship diaries written by the students, and discuss the significance of face and voice in intimacy practices in close friendships. My focus is on the

argument of whether physical distance impacts the emotional distance in close friendships. Hence, I explore the temporary status of friendships and the challenges of maintaining close friendships, either with long-distance or close-distance close friends. I introduce a new concept of 'frozen friends' used in discussing long-distance close friends' intimacy practices. In this chapter, I also discover the ways in which new friendships formed abroad turn into close friendships in a short time, but only for a temporary period. I discuss the expectations of support and emotional connectedness while the students are in the UK as well as when they go back to Malaysia for good.

Finally, Chapter Six *Conclusion* draws upon the entire thesis, tying up the various theoretical and empirical strands to understand the Malaysian students' close friendships and their intimacy practices. Attention is given to address the implications of the study for relevant audiences and the contribution of my study in the debates of intimacy, friendships, gender practices as well as religion. This final chapter also includes a discussion of the implication of the findings to future research in this area.

## CHAPTER TWO METHODOLOGY

In the introduction to this thesis, I explained the idea of intimacy and friendship practices, focusing on the context of living temporarily abroad. In this chapter, I explore how the notion of close friendship practices has led me to choose the particular methods, and I explain the significance of these methods for my research. The research instruments used in this study are friendship maps, friendship diaries and semi-structured in-depth interviews which I carried out with 18 Malaysian undergraduate and postgraduate taught students. This chapter describes the rationale behind the choice and design of these methods, showing how they are appropriate both for the theoretical underpinnings of social research and for looking at close friendship practices, in particular. I describe the specifics of my research that led to the recruitment of Malaysian students who came to the UK alone and for the first time, and what this means for the focus of my work. I explain the ethical considerations of this research, looking at the recent literature on maps and diaries, at my relationship with the participants, and the importance of focusing on young sojourners' voices and stories in this research.

This chapter is divided into three sections: 1) research framework, 2) research instruments, and 3) researcher's reflexivity. In the first section of this chapter, I explain the background of my research which includes the reasons for focusing on Malaysian students, the recruitment process and ethical considerations, the demographic background of my participants, the phases of data collection as well as the process of analysing the data in my study. While in the second

section, I describe three research instruments used: friendship maps, friendship diaries and semi-structured in-depth interviews, and explain the reasons for choosing them for my data collection. Finally, in the third section, I discuss my reflexivity in this research, my position as a researcher and a Malaysian student living temporarily abroad, and draw on the advantages and disadvantages of this position in my study.

## **RESEARCH FRAMEWORK**

My study focuses on Malaysian students in the UK, their experiences of living abroad and their practices of intimacy in close friendships. It is essential to explain the process of data collection and the background of my study, including the demographic profile of the students who participated. The first thing that I did before I started my data collection was to submit an application to the Lancaster University Research Ethics Committee and to get the approval from them to conduct my study. After that, I did a pilot study to test the validity of the data collection instruments, and I started to search for the potential participants for my full-scale study and contacted them. As previously mentioned, there are three research questions that I investigate in this study which developed through my review of the literature, as well as the preliminary data of the pilot study. In this section, I discuss the recruitment and ethical considerations then the participants' profiles and the phases of data collection.

## **Recruitment and Ethical Considerations**

I employed the ethical guidelines established by the Lancaster University Research Ethics Committee, in my project. Within this ethical framework, my choice of semi-structured in-depth interviews is dependent upon several factors, including access to conduct research amongst students, financial considerations, and periods of reflection necessary to complete this study. Although my study involved human participants it was considered low ethical risk research. I used semi-structured interviews alongside friendship maps and three-week friendship diaries as research instruments, and conducted my study with 18 Malaysian students aged 20 to 25, in three universities in the North West of England. It is important to highlight that the students disclosed their personal information and emotions during the data collection. Some of the questions involved questions regarding gender, ethnicity, social class, language or cultural status of the students. However, my study did not involve any sensitive issues that would cause emotional distress for the students.

The participants are Malaysian undergraduate and Masters students recruited via snowball sampling. Before the interview, participant information sheets and consent forms (see Appendix I and II) were emailed to the students before the interview to tell them what would happen during the interview. With respect to ethical considerations regarding the students who partook in my research, I obtained their informed consent before audiotaping interviews and using the materials included in the digital friendship diaries. The students were also given the option to skip or refuse to answer questions and could withdraw from my

study at any time. All names reported in this study, including the students and their friends have been changed to maintain the confidentiality. The students use the code, for example, F1 and F2, in the friendship maps, diaries and interviews to refer to their friends, instead of using the real names. The friendship maps and diaries are kept confidential and will be destroyed within the period stated in the consent forms.

### **Participants**

My research intends to investigate the intimacy practices in close friendship of young people who live temporarily abroad for the purposes of higher education. As mentioned above, I focus on one group of international students, specifically Malaysian students in the North West of England aged between 20 to 25 years old. I chose this age group because most of the young people at this age are undergraduate and master students in the United Kingdom (Universities UK and Higher Education Statistics Agency 2013) and people in this age category are the most frequent internet users in Malaysia (Malaysian Communication and Multimedia Commissions 2014).

The purpose of focusing on one group of participants who share a similar age group and background is to understand what is the expected and accepted behaviour based on one background culture (Uski and Lampinen 2014). Besides that, it is essential to identify whether Malaysian cultural and religious practices have a significant impact on the close friendship practices for this particular group. The demographic background of participants is illustrated in

more details in Table 2.1 below. I used pseudonyms for the names of participants and universities to maintain the confidentiality of the data provided by the participants.

Table 2.1 Demographic Background of Participants

	Name	No. of Close Friends*	Age	Ethnicity	Religion	Social Class	Relationship Status	Period of Mobilities	Scholarship	Courses	University
MALE	<i>James</i>	12	21	Siamese-Chinese	Buddhist	Middle	Single	Four years	No	Accounting & Finance	A University
	<i>Jason</i>	20	22	Indian	Hindu	Middle	Single	One year	Yes	Law	B University
	<i>Ken</i>	20	21	Chinese	Buddhist	Middle	Single	One year	Yes	Accounting & Finance	C University
	<i>Alvin</i>	20	21	Chinese	Buddhist	Middle	Single	Two years	No	Accounting & Finance	A University
	<i>Adam</i>	18	20	Malay	Islam	Upper	Single	Two years	No	Accounting & Finance	A University
	<i>Izhan</i>	18	23	Malay	Islam	Middle	Single	One year	Yes	Accounting & Finance	B University
	<i>Alif</i>	17	22	Malay	Islam	Middle	In a relationship	One year	Yes	Accounting & Finance	A University
	<i>Zain</i>	17	25	Malay	Islam	Middle	Single	One year	Yes	Mechanical Engineering	B University
	<i>Saiful</i>	20	23	Malay	Islam	Middle	Single	Two years	Yes	Accounting & Finance	C University
	<i>Yana</i>	13	22	Indian	Hindu	Middle	In a relationship	One year	Yes	Accounting & Finance	A University
FEMALE	<i>Jenny</i>	10	22	Chinese	Buddhist	Middle	In a relationship	One year	Yes	Accounting	C University
	<i>Sweeli</i>	13	25	Chinese	Buddhist	Middle	In a relationship	One year	No	Psychology	A University
	<i>Tiffany</i>	12	23	Chinese	Christian	Upper	Single	Two years	No	Accounting & Finance	A University
	<i>Aina</i>	20	25	Malay	Islam	Middle	Single	Four years	Yes	Medicine	C University
	<i>Lily</i>	14	22	Malay	Islam	Middle	Single	One year	Yes	Accounting & Finance	C University
	<i>Nora</i>	9	24	Malay	Islam	Lower	In a relationship	One year	Yes	Electrical Engineering	B University
	<i>Fira</i>	15	25	Malay	Islam	Middle	Single	One year	Yes	Architecture	B University
	<i>Mila</i>	20	22	Malay	Islam	Middle	In a relationship	One year	Yes	Accounting & Finance	C University

Note: \* the numbers of close friends are capped at 20 names

The reason for choosing Malaysian students as the participants is not only because I am a Malaysian but also because the Malaysian community living in the UK is approximately 60,000 people as reported in the UK census (Office for National Statistics 2017). Moreover, Malaysia is one of the top non-EU sending countries for higher education in the UK (UKCISA 2015). I identified the participants who fit the specific purpose of this study and asked them for assistance to introduce me to other students who share similar characteristics and interests. Based on Table 2.1 above, seven students from A University, five students from B University and six students from C University participated in my study. As I put my attention on living temporarily abroad in my study, it is important to highlight that the students who participated in my study were those who had lived in the UK for more than a year, but not more than five years.

The consequences of using snowball sampling are that most of the students came from the similar academic course and social background. 11 out of 18 students were studying accounting and finance. The remaining students studied law, mechanical engineering, accounting only, psychology, medicine, electrical engineering and architecture. All were unmarried and came to the UK without family members. Almost all the students came to the UK for the first time for the purposes of study. However, I found that five female students were in a relationship and only one male student reported had a girlfriend. Thirteen were sponsored by a Malaysian government agency and came from middle-class families, while the remaining five students were self-sponsored students.

I put my attention on the ways in which ethnicities and religious beliefs influenced the practices of intimacy in close friendships. As Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multicultural country, I determined the diverseness of the students and chose from various ethnicities and religious beliefs. For that reason, ten Malay students, five Chinese students, two Indian students and one Siamese-Chinese student were chosen as participants in my study. All Malay students are Muslim, Indian students are Hindus, whereas the Siamese-Chinese student and all Chinese students are Buddhist except one were Christian.

### **Phases of Data Collection**

The data collection process started with a pilot study followed by two phases of the full-scale study. After I got the approval from the Lancaster University Research Ethics Committee, I conducted the pilot study in October 2015 with three international students. From the analysed data of the pilot study, I made a few amendments to the interview questions guide and started to recruit the participants. The first phase of data collection was conducted in November and early December 2015, while the second phase of data collection was conducted in December 2015 and completed in the middle of January 2016. All 18 students participated in the first phase of data collection, whereas only eight out of 18 students were chosen to participate in the second phase. The overall process of data collection is exemplified in Figure 2.1 below.

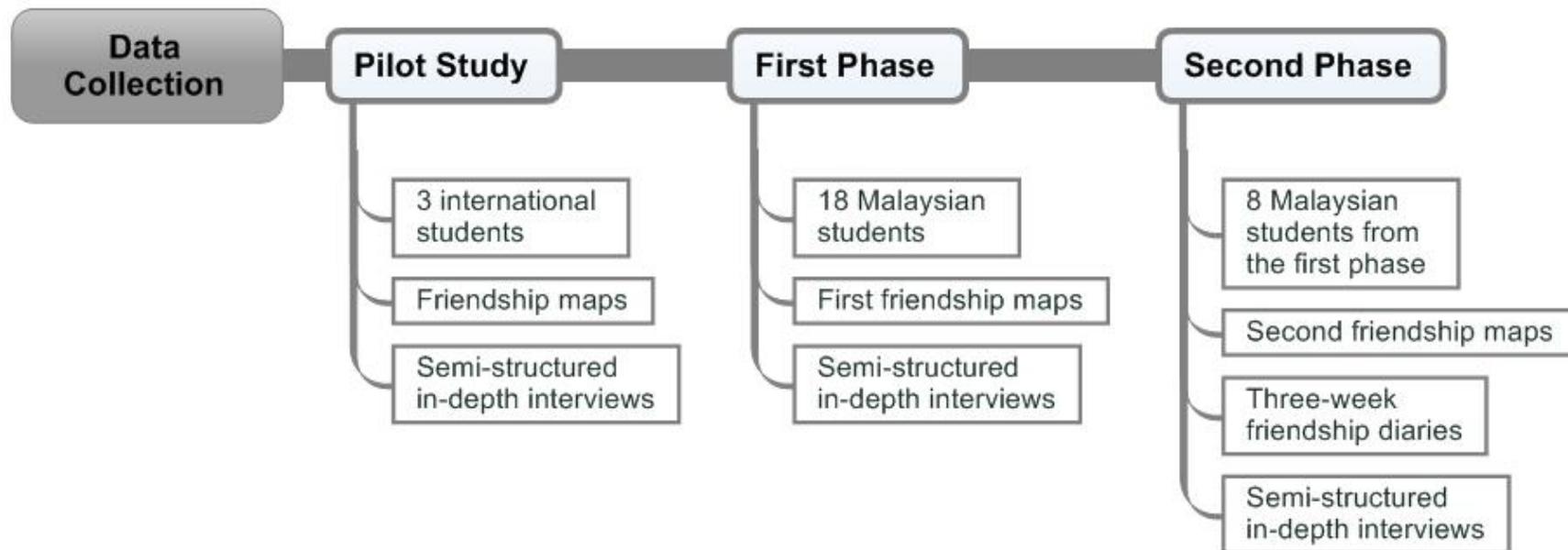


Figure 2.1 Data Collection Process

## PILOT STUDY

After I obtained Lancaster University Research Ethics approval to conduct my study, I started to construct the semi-structured interview questions that I found relevant to answer the research questions in my study. I developed the interview questions based on Spencer and Pahl's (2006, pp.232–235) topic guide of informal social relationships. A copy of the interview questions guide can be found in Appendix III. In October 2015, I tested these interview questions along with friendship maps in a pilot study conducted with three international students from Brazil, Brunei and Malaysia who had lived in the UK for more than a year. The participants were a PhD, masters and an undergraduate student. Although the participants came from different cultural backgrounds, I noticed similar themes that emerged from the pilot study and I also noted a few themes that I needed to pay more attention to for the real data collection. I made some amendments to the interview questions guide and decided to construct my data collection in two phases to include the friendship diary in the second phase.

Findings from the pilot study gave me a guideline for my research and were relevant for both phases of data collection. I found that besides homophily, trust and honesty, there were other significant concepts, such as familiarity, anxiety and length of knowing each other that I should ask the participants about in more detail. I did not attain similar findings in the real data collection as the participants for my pilot study came from the different cultural backgrounds. However, through this pilot study, I learned the necessity to draw my attention to Malaysian cultural and religious practices, as well as family practices to

understand the ways in which students practice intimacy and close friendships when living temporarily abroad.

## FIRST PHASE

I started the first phase of data collection in November until the early of December 2015. The goal was to gain a broad perspective on close friendships and intimate interaction between the students with their LD or GC close friends. The first phase of data collection took about two to two and half hours to be completed for each student. The interviews were conducted in a private and informal setting, and we used the English and Malay languages for the interviews. Upon reading the participant information sheet and agreeing to participate, 18 students completed a consent form, and I asked brief questions about their demographic information and close friendships. They were asked to list down a maximum twenty names of their close friends, to be arranged on the first friendship map.

As I have stated earlier in this chapter, each close friend was referred to by an identification number, which the students were asked to use on the materials of the second phase of data collection: the second friendship maps and friendship diaries, so they could be matched after the study's completion. I also asked the students about their experiences and impressions of close friendships, the style of interaction with close friends, as well as the general use of the Internet and social media, including evaluations of the types of social media use, duration, frequency and weekly amount of use. These general views and experiences of

close friendships and intimate interaction were be questioned in more detail in the second phase of data collection.

## SECOND PHASE

Upon completing the first phase, I started the second phase of data collection in December 2015 until the middle of January 2016. The data collection took about one and a half to two hours to be completed for each student. The goal was to gain a more specific perspective on the nature of the interactions and intimacy practices of LD and GC close friends, enacted through online and face-to-face interactions. Only eight from 18 students, as highlighted in the Table 2.1 above, were chosen to participate in this phase. The students were given instructions and asked to conduct the interactions with their close friends, either via face-to-face or social media, and to record their interactions in the digital friendship diaries for three weeks.

The students were told that these should be interactions they would be conducted even in the absence of participating in the study. They were instructed that, in doing so, they should not deviate from their own natural interaction style, and their friends should not be made aware the students might be reporting on the interactions. They were asked to update their friendship diaries upon finishing the interaction to ensure the accurate recording of their perceptions, and to complete the second friendship maps and update their interactions with close friends in the three-week digital diary before the interviews. The first friendship maps produced at the first phase of data

collection were shown to the students in the second phase of the study. The students were invited to provide reflexive comments on any changes noted.

### **Analysis of Data**

As I have stated earlier in this thesis, I identified and analysed the debates of friendship and intimacy in previous studies before I started my data collection. This shaped the ways in which I addressed and conducted my study. I explored the topic of close friendship in more detail and ensured that the students understood my study would be about close friendship. Although my focus was already narrowed, I tried to be open in my approach to analysis. I attempted to ensure that the views gathered were accurately represented and did not merely use the data to justify my existing position and experiences as a Malaysian student. Although I drew on my own experiences of living temporarily abroad when planning the data collection and analysis, my aim was not to replicate this in my study. For that reason, I chose different types of research instruments to focus on the voices and experiences of the students.

Before I completed all the data collection, I began my analysis and used the first transcripts and friendship maps from the first interviews to plan the second phase of data collection. I went over the transcripts and recorded audios of my interviews as well as the friendship maps by using Atlas.ti software for qualitative analysis. The students' quotations chosen from the transcripts were revisited after I had listened to the recorded audio and read the notes that I took during the interviews. This act of analysis allowed me to see whether I had

missed any significant information or interpreted the data in different ways without the context of voice intonation to maintain the validity and reliability of the interviews (Alshenqeeti 2014). I analysed and made a few codes of the recurrent themes throughout the interviews. The codes were derived partly from other friendship studies' insights into crucial themes, such as the suffusion of family and friends, gender role ideologies and the usage of social media, and were partly drawn from the interview material itself. These themes foreground my discussion in the analysis chapters later in this thesis.

## **RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS**

In this section, I elucidate three research instruments that I used throughout my study to explore the students' experiences of living temporarily abroad: 1) friendship maps, 2) friendship diaries and 3) semi-structured in-depth interviews. In my study, friendship maps and semi-structured interviews were used in both phases of data collection, whereas friendship diaries were only used in the second phase of data collection. It is important to highlight that my reasons to use more than one instrument for my data collection are to obtain more abundant data and validate the research findings (Alshenqeeti 2014). By using these instruments in two phases of data collection, I acquired sufficient data that were used to frame my arguments in the Chapter 3, 4 and 5 later in this thesis.

## Friendship Maps

My study used friendship maps to gain a better understanding of the strength of friendship and the types of interaction that take place between friends. It is important to highlight that maps have been used in the previous studies to identify personal community (Spencer and Pahl 2006), family relationships (Gabb 2009) and, distance friendships and intimacy (Cronin 2014b). However, my primary focus is not on the formal mapping of friendship connections like in a social network analysis. Instead, I focus on a detailed examination of the students' experiences and practices of close friendships. As previously mentioned, before the first meeting, the students were asked to prepare a list of friends up to twenty names, who were considered as close and important in their life. The meaning of 'close friends' in my study was open to participants' considerations about close friendship, which include family members and other personal networks as reported in the findings. Preparation of the list of close friends before the meeting was to give time and space for the students to think and choose which friends would be included or excluded in their list.

In the first meeting, one A4 size map with concentric circles was given out to each student (see Appendix IV). Based on the list of close friends prepared, the students were asked to write a code name for each one, for example, F1 until F20, and arrange the code names in order of importance on the map before the interview. From the arrangement of the names, the nearer to the centre of the concentric circle is the closest friendship (Spencer and Pahl 2006). The purpose of using the first friendship map in my study was to identify the friendship

network, to focus on the details of friends who are close and important for the students, and to explore the meaning of friendship based on the students' experiences. The resulting maps formed the basis for the interviews. I asked the students to talk through the maps, asking them further questions about their friends, how they define friendship, their impression of and feelings towards friendships in general. These quotations were then used to prompt a conversation about their experiences of close friendship more specifically: whether they saw any difference between friend-like and family-like relationship and their thoughts regarding physical and emotional distance, in order to describe intimacy practices in close friendship.

The students completed two friendship maps in my study, once in the first meeting and once in the second meeting, after the friendship diaries were completed. For the second friendship maps, the students were instructed to update the list of close friends and arrange the names on the map. These close friends might include the names listed in the first friendship maps, as well as friends who they recently contacted via face-to-face or social media, as recorded in the friendship diaries. The aim of using the second friendship map was to explore the differences of friendship mapping in two different times of research. I draw my attention to discover the pattern of friendship practices, frequency of contact on social media and intimacy practices in GC and LD close friendships. Although the data from these friendship maps alone are not strong enough to explain friendship formation and practices, they can be analysed and expanded through friendship diaries and in-depth interviews to understand these contexts in more detail.

## Friendship Diaries

Beside friendship maps, friendship diaries provide temporal information of friendship interaction by capturing the students' practices and experiences of everyday lives. The real-time data captured by using the friendship diaries provide an overview of current behaviour, highlight issues relevant to participants (Tracy 2013) and serve as a main function to talk about close friendship and intimacy practices in the interviews. The aim of using diaries in this research is to record the thoughts and actions of participants, to explore patterns of friendship practices and media usage, as well as to examine the real-time data as it will support data already gathered on the first interview. I instructed the students to write a digital diary where the template was provided on Microsoft OneNote (see Appendix V). The students were asked to record their daily life and conversation with their close friends through any medium, such as face-to-face or media related communication, such as phone call, messaging or social media.

Each student was briefed in the first meeting about what to include in their friendship diaries and again upon receiving the friendship diaries via email link. However, it is important to highlight that the friendship diary templates provided are unstructured. The students were instructed to update their friendship diaries daily for a three-week period: to record their interaction with close friends, either face-to-face or on social media, the frequency of contact and the content of the conversation. They were also asked whether they had initiated the conversation with their friends and the reasons for it. I attempted to leave the friendship

diaries as open-ended as possible, in order for the students to find the easiest and fastest way to put a diary together. For these reasons, I gave them examples in the guidelines of what they could include, such as screenshots, photos, audios and videos. Microsoft OneNote allows the students to capture related media and reflect on their feelings, emotions, and thoughts about their close friendship and intimacy practices that they might typically ignore.

I asked my participants automatically sync the diaries to my computer, at least once a week, when they were connected to the internet. There was a situation when some of the students were very busy with exams and coursework, thus required more time to update and sync their diaries. Even though each student felt the burden and responsibility for completing the friendship diaries, they were a useful tool in my study that draws on intimacy. Diary content enables the researcher to explore 'sensitive subjects or the private sphere' (Harvey 2011, p.666). Indeed, the data can be used throughout the data collection process, and its accuracy and trustworthiness is complemented in the in-depth interviews. I met with the students approximately three weeks after completion of the diaries, which allowed me to prepare my interview questions for the follow-up interviews.

### **Interviews**

As I have stated earlier in this chapter, I used Spencer and Pahl's (2006, pp.232–235) topic guide of informal social relationships as a reference to my study and developed the interview questions based on the context of Malaysian

students living temporarily abroad. Holmes (2015, p.64) indicates that interviews may offer more insights into emotional reflexivity as a researcher will get more understanding of emotions than textual or document analysis. However, she argues that performing an interview with one participant may not encourage them to reveal more of their emotions. For that reason, I conducted the semi-structured in-depth interviews twice in this study and used the data alongside the friendship maps and diaries. The reasons for using this qualitative mixed method are to provide a more fruitful, deeper and contextual understanding of close friendship and intimacy practices of the group studied.

I gathered the information on the demographic background of the students, including gender, age, social class, ethnicity and religion during the first phase of data collection. Several questions related to the topic and objectives of my study were prepared in advance, and the students were asked these questions in a semi-formal interview without specific sequence. Open questions provide maximum flexibility in acquiring new information and topics arising from the students. The students were also asked about their friendship practices with the names of close friends arranged on the first friendship map that was completed at the beginning of the interview. I interviewed the students based on their first friendship maps to discover the characteristic of close friends, the patterns of close friendships as they appeared in the concentric circle of the friendship maps and their intimacy practices with GC and LD close friends.

After the first round of interviews, I asked the students if they would be interested in partaking in the second phase of my study, which included the

friendship map and diary, and a follow-up interview. At first, all of the students accepted, however, not all were committed to updating the diaries. Some of the students did not reply to my email and messages, while some of them withdrew their participation because they did not feel comfortable with doing the diary. For that reason, only eight students were voluntarily involved in the second phase of data collection. After the friendship diaries were completed, we met for the second time. The second interview was another opportunity to create a broader and more productive space of exchange as I interviewed the students based on the second friendship maps and three-week friendship diaries. It was motivating to revisit particular themes that were discussed during the first interview, and it was an opportunity to get more specific details about what they included in their friendship maps and diaries.

I looked at the changes in the names of close friends in comparison to the first friendship maps and explored the intimate interaction patterns with GC and LD close friends as presented in the friendship diaries. It is notable that the meaning and practices of close friendship and intimacy were acquired in more detail through interviews. Indeed, in-depth interviews were used to explore new information and to expand the existing understanding of the research topics (Tracy 2013), explicitly close friendship and intimacy practices, based on Malaysian students' experiences. My study emphasises the quality of interviews rather than quantity of participants, to explore the personal experiences of close friendship practices as well as to understand the ways in which close friendship and intimacy were perceived from a Malaysian perspective. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were helpful in creating a space in which the students felt

comfortable to discuss their experiences of close friendships, as well as their uses and practices of social media for intimate interaction with close friends in Malaysia as well as new close friends formed in the UK. It allowed me to collect more information and details about particular experiences or events, and it was productive to go into more depth, to listen to the Malaysian students' voices about the ways in which they practice close friendships in the situation of living temporarily abroad.

### **RESEARCHER'S REFLEXIVITY**

In this section, I discuss the ways in which my position as a researcher and a Malaysian student is significant as another research instrument in my study. My position as a researcher with a shared similar background and experiences has facilitated the interaction and created a conversational space where the students share sufficient information about their lives (Pezalla et al. 2012). I conducted the interviews privately in informal spaces; such as at the coffee shop and the students' social space, and alternately used Malay and English in our conversations. Our conversations were more like chatting with a friend rather than a formal interview, which I found useful for making the students feel comfortable to talk about their personal experiences with me, as a researcher. Although sharing a similar position as a Malaysian student brings advantages, there were challenges that I needed to encounter throughout my study. Hence, in this section, I discuss the advantages and disadvantages of my position throughout the data collection and analysis.

## **The Benefits and Pitfalls as an Insider Researcher**

As my study has engaged with the context of living temporarily abroad, I feel really connected as some of the findings reflected my own experiences and feelings. However, it is not merely a self-reflective study. Although my experiences as a Malaysian student in the UK have driven my study and I specifically chose to study the Malaysian students in a group that I belong to (Breen 2007), my roles and experiences did not subjugate my position as a researcher. My aim is to foreground the voices and experiences of Malaysian students in order to explore their ideas of close friendship and intimacy practices. For that reason, I tried to avoid asking leading questions throughout the interviews and gave the students a chance to recap and clarify the points that they made to maintain the validity and reliability of the interview process (Alshenqeeti 2014).

I do not just focus intensely on the students' specific statements of close friendship to describe the meaning and practices of close friendships. Instead, I discover the factors, based on these students' experiences and events, that made close friendship practices possible in the context of living temporarily abroad. According to Finlay (2002, p.536) the process of reflection and reflexive analysis should start from the moment the research is conceived and should not just get done at the end of the research. This act of reflexivity is important to review my initial ideas about close friendships and intimacy. I argue that it is significant to draw on the Malaysian students' voices and experiences in order to conceptualise close friendship and intimacy. Based on the students' stories,

I framed my arguments, associated those arguments with the past studies and introduced two new concepts: 'frozen friend' and 'familiarity as a family' which I will discuss later in the analysis chapters.

It is important to highlight that I constructed the interview questions based on my reflexive analysis of the literature review as well as my personal experiences of living temporarily abroad. From this act of reflexivity, I noticed the significant themes and debates that I need to emphasise in my study. For example, I found that it is significant to focus on the students' adjustment and adaptation to living abroad as the starting point of my interviews. I asked them about their experiences prior to and after arrival in the UK to explore the formation of new close friendships which I identified as one of the significant factors for my study. Besides that, my reflexivity with regard to previous findings and personal experiences shaped the subsequent questions in the interviews regarding the usage of social media for the maintenance of close friendships at a distance.

Consistent with Attia and Edge (2017), I argue that I did not only frame the interview questions based on my knowledge, feelings and values but also brought these elements to construct my theoretical framework and my argument. Throughout my study, I was able to draw on the debates of close friendships and themes to which they related, based on my reflexivity of the material in the literature reviews, the data collected, as well as my personal experiences. Being an insider researcher was advantageous as I acquired a greater understanding of Malaysian culture, social norms and religious beliefs. My knowledge and position as a researcher and a Malaysian student allow me to tackle the issues

related to roles, responsibilities and daily lives (Bonner and Tolhurst 2002; Saidin and Yaacob 2016) as voiced by the students during the interviews. As the majority of the students are Malays and Muslim, my knowledge about Malay culture, as a Malay and a Muslim, is significant in understanding close friendship practices in these contexts. Moreover, I am familiar with the problems and challenges faced by the students, such as financial, academic and homesickness, which helped me to lead the conversation during the interviews.

When I began my study with the Malaysian students in the UK, I did not consider that my gender to be a particular issue. I assumed that as I am a student who came from a similar Malaysian community living in the UK, I would be able to easily talk to the students and would have little problem in building rapport and trust. However, the rapport building and the trust I gained over time took longer with some participants, especially male students. Since the initial process of data collection, it was difficult to find and recruit male students who are interested to participate in my study compared to female students. Besides that, it was difficult to discuss and talk about men's friendship practices as well as their hobbies and interests, such as sports, cars and computer games, which I often knew little about. I learned that as a female researcher I had to adopt different strategies with the male students and to rely on my position as a PhD and Malaysian student to gain trust and respect as well as to acquire relevant and valuable data from them.

As a researcher, I therefore had to be flexible and adapt to different situations. I discovered that my knowledge, feelings and values were used to facilitate the

intimate conversation with the students. I constructed my study with the ideas that the sense of familiarity and belonging will be naturally established between the students and myself as we shared similar background and experiences of living temporarily abroad. Attia and Edge (2017) suggest that an insider researcher, starts their study with trust as an essential foundation. Before I conducted the interviews, I clarified the participants' anonymity and ensured them that all of their personal stories would be kept confidential. With common knowledge as well as by using familiar language, I was able to approach the students in more appropriate and comfortable ways. The natural flow of interaction and shared experiences meant the conversation become more comfortable throughout the interviews.

I argue that the intimacy that was established in my relationship with the students promoted trustworthiness and resulted in more accurate and authentic data (Creswell and Miller 2000). The students were actively engaged with the conversation to the extent that some of them could talk about their personal problems and emotional experiences, including family problems, mental health issues and dealing with the death of a family member. Being an insider researcher helped me to lead the conversation, although I faced difficulties to give immediate responses to unexpected emotional stories from the students. One notable example is when one of the female students, Anis, was crying when she told me about her uncle's death. I stopped the interview for about fifteen minutes to calm her down, and I tried not to be swayed by emotion, as this situation reminded both us of home. I found it was hard to avoid the feeling

of homesickness when the students and I talked about family members and emotional events related to the practices of intimacy and close friendships.

As a Malaysian student living abroad, it is difficult not to relate my personal experiences, thoughts and feelings when conducting this study as it often relates to my personal daily interactions and intimacy practices. Although I tried not to reveal my opinions, experiences and position to conform to the ethical guideline, it was hard not to use my personal instincts to guide the conversation and to gain the students' trust to talk about their personal experiences and problems. I found it difficult not to have two ways of conversation in the interviews. For that reason, I usually answered the questions lightly and quickly to change the focus to the students when they asked me about my personal experiences regarding some issues. I draw on my analyses of close friendship and intimacy practices in the next three chapters, and I attempt to deliver the voices of the students with quotes chosen from the interviews.

### **CHAPTER THREE GENDER PRACTICES IN CLOSE FRIENDSHIP**

In this chapter, I discuss gender practices in close friendships. This chapter is divided into two sections: men versus women friendships and students' friendship patterns. In the first section, I discuss the impact of gender role ideologies as well as cultural and religious practices in the creation of gender identity. Gender role ideology and religion provide a foundation for the discussion of gendered behaviour in male and female students' friendship practices. In this study, I argue that the ways in which people 'do gender' in social interactions and act upon it is based on the societal expectations of what is appropriate for a male or a female. I consider that 'doing friendship' is a part of 'doing gender' and I draw on this debate in the close friendship patterns in the second section that focuses on gendered patterns in friendship practices, particularly in terms of the number of close friends, the hierarchy of friendship and intimacy, cross-gender close friendship and partner as a close friend. The discussions in this chapter are significant to understand the practices in terms of gender, intimacy as well as close friendship which foreground the discussion in the next chapters.

I address three key arguments in this chapter. Firstly, I argue that the practices of friendships are complicated around gender. I found that men's and women's friendships are different as some people follow the gender role ideology in their intimacy practices. Even though the students perceived friendships as important relationships, gender role ideology builds the impression that men are associated with activity-based friendships and instrumental roles, while women

are associated with intimate conversation based friendships and expressive roles. Consequently, when people behave in a gendered way, this gives the impression of them appearing to be more masculine or feminine and this may influence the ways in which the students practice intimacy in close friendships. However, I found that some male students in my study are emotionally expressive and practised intimate talk with same gender close friends and some female students practised activity-based friendships. For that reason, the questions that emerge from this argument are, if the students practise friendships differently from the gender role ideology, what is the significance of this and is it related to people studying abroad?

Secondly, I argue that culture and religion create gender identity in a Malaysian context and shape the way in which the students practise their friendships. People learn to be feminine and masculine through their socialisation throughout their lifetime, which in turn shapes gender identities. Gender socialisation is derived from cultural and religious practices of individuals. People do gender by taking up a role and acting upon it, and religious people do religion in gendered ways. However, the students came from diverse backgrounds and religious beliefs. Half of them are Malays who practice Islam, while the others are Chinese and Indians who practice either Buddhism, Hinduism or Christianity. Despite different cultural backgrounds and religious beliefs, this chapter explores the question of whether the students practise religion in gendered ways and whether religion influences the ways in which they practise intimacy in their close friendships.

Finally, I argue that close friendships in my study do show some gendered patterns. As men's and women's friendships are different according to the gender role ideology, the patterns of friendship are somehow different in terms of the number of and hierarchy of friends and intimacy, as well as the patterns of cross-gender and partners as close friends. The male students listed more close friends than the female students but they claimed that their friendship practices are not as intimate as female students' friendships. Therefore, it is essential to explore the ways in which the students conceptualise intimacy and to identify whether close friendship practices reproduce normative gendered practices and/or also destabilise them. Hence, in this chapter, I discuss why friendship practices are different for men and women but are not strictly gendered and how gender roles ideology as well as cultural norms and religious obligations shape their close friendship practices when they are living abroad.

### **INTIMACY PRACTICES: MEN VERSUS WOMEN**

Men's and women's friendships patterns, in general, are different as there is a general assumption that men's friendships are less intimate than women's friendships, and this has been discussed in western studies (Bank and Hansford 2000; Felmlee et al. 2012; Migliaccio 2014; Morimoto and Yang 2013). In accordance with my present results, those previous studies have demonstrated that friendships are different for heterosexual men and women, with men developing instrumental support while women develop more expressive support. However, the patterns and practices that primarily focus on close friendship have not previously been described in past studies. In my study, I found that the

ways in which the students practice close friendships are influenced by gender role ideology. Thus, this raises questions of whether the ways in which male and female students 'doing' or practising intimacy are distinct and whether these practices of intimacy impact the patterns of close friendships in terms of the quantity, language as well as the inclusion of family members, partners and cross-gender friends.

I try not to limit the definition of intimacy only to personal disclosure and expressiveness as I argue that close friendships are also developed through engaging in shared-activities and giving physical help. Intimacy is the quality of the close connection between people. The process of building the quality of intimacy in friendships may involve emotional feelings as well as physical and bodily intimacy (Jamieson 2011, p.1). Although my study includes the discussion of partners as close friends, intimacy in my study does not only represent bodily and sexual intimacy. In my study, the process of building the quality of intimacy in close friendships is present in terms of the language used, routines of interactions as well as the impact of cultural norms and religious beliefs. My study focuses on how the students who are from different cultural background and religious beliefs make and sustain intimate forms of friendships. As intimacy should not be seen as the norm everywhere or follow the Western model, as argued by Jamieson (2011), I explore the special characteristics of intimate and close friendships valued by the students.

I found that it is important to primarily explore the intimacy practices of close friendships in relation to gender. In the academic debates about gender and

friendship, there is a general belief that friendships are different for heterosexual men and women. As previously mentioned, men's friendships are usually associated with the availability of tangible help and doing things, while women's friendships revolve around emotional expressiveness and self-disclosure (Gillespie et al. 2015) in which it is consequently assumed that men's friendships are less intimate than women's. Nevertheless, I do not totally agree with this assumption. Although the male and female students in my study shared diverse views on the hierarchy of friendship and the meaning behind each circle of friendship as illustrated on their friendship maps, I did not find any significant gender differences in describing close friendships.

The students perceive friendships as important relationships and idealise a close friend as a person whom they love unconditionally, feel comfortable with, trust, and show their real self to. Close friends also accept their strengths and weaknesses, are available when needed and share a similar attitude, mentality and interest. Both male and female students have acquired emotional and physical support from same-gender close friends and this is similar to Armstrong's (1987) findings that Malaysian women perceived instrumental and expressive support in same-gender friendships as important in their lives and further research could be undertaken on this subject.

It is important to highlight that there are no significant gender differences in terms of the definition of close friendships as well as friendship support in my study. However, in contrast to Gillespie et al.'s (2014) study, I found that there are significant gender differences in terms of the number of close friends and

types of friendship for men and women, which I discuss later in this section. I argue that friendship practices are different for men and women but are not strictly gendered even though I found that the language of friendship and the practices of intimacy to be gendered in my study. The male and female students constructed their interactions in a masculine or feminine based on societal expectations and friends' reactions towards them.

As I discussed before, doing gender is a socially constructed process as it is culturally learned through the repetition of social norms and behaviours that are deemed by society to be acceptable and appropriate for being a man or a woman. Gender not only constrains and provides opportunities for people in doing things; it also makes people behave in certain ways in order to follow the gender norms and expectations. As a woman raised in the Malaysian culture, I consider that the way in which I dress, talk and act are actually shaped by gender role ideology, which I have learned throughout my socialisation. I deliberately exhibit gendered behaviour in order to follow the Malaysian social norms and expectations of being a woman. Consequently, friendships and doing gender are not a matter of personal and free choice (Allan 1989), but influenced by the social structures and norms of a particular society.

For that reason, I consider that it is also significant to highlight the relationship between doing gender and how the students living abroad do their friendships. Unfamiliar surroundings present challenges to the students in terms of making a rapid adjustment to the academic demands as well as adapting to a new culture and lifestyle. Dissimilarities in the way people dress, speak and behave,

religious practices, teaching and learning styles and other aspects also present challenges to the students to adjust to and perform their behaviour according to British gender norms and expectations.

Indeed, intimacy is not a universal concept as it is socially constructed so people define and practice it differently (Jamieson 2011); common intimacy practices in Malaysia might be considered strange in the UK and vice versa. Therefore, in this section, I discuss the impact of gender role ideology as well as cultural and religious expectations in the practices of close friendships. I consider that gender is not only originated biologically and developed through socialisation; it is also a subject to change as people not only 'have' a gender or 'are' a gender, they also 'do' gender.

Recent friendship studies by Blatterer (2016) and Cronin (2015) discussed the relationship between gender, friendship and intimacy, but they omitted to discuss these aspects from a religious perspective. I argue that it is significant to highlight the relationship between gender and religion in friendship practices as "gender is not only about the family or household, and religion is not only a matter of phenomena in formally religious spaces" (Avishai et al. 2015, p.19). Therefore, later in this section, I explain how culture and religion construct gendered behaviour and influence the students' friendship practices. As discussed in previous studies in Malaysia (Shamsul and Shamsul 1998; Haji Yusuf 1984), social stratification in Malaysia focuses on ethnicity and religion more than social class and economic background. Thus, the discussion of cultural and religious expectations in relation to ethnicity is vital as these issues

are crucial in the Malaysian context. As the situation of living abroad serves as the central context in my study, in this chapter I identify any behavioural changes in doing gender as well as doing friendship due to this temporary mobility.

### **The Fear of Intimacy: Being Masculine or Being Feminine**

In a heteronormative gender order where heterosexuality is taken as the norm, the intimacy forms are distinguished into masculine and feminine categories. These intimacy forms are associated with men and women which consequently continues the assumed friendship gender dichotomy (Migliaccio 2009; Migliaccio 2014; Reeder 2003; Felmler et al. 2012). Although the sexual orientation of the students and sexual inequality are not the main focus in my discussion – as all of the students described their sexual orientation as heterosexual, I found that heteronormativity influences the way in which the students do gender as well as close friendship. Based on the gender roles of masculinity and femininity, I argue that people do gender in many different ways in friendship practices, and from these practices they also create gender. Gender is not fixed and there are different ways of doing femininity and masculinity (Bank and Hansford 2000; Walker 1994). Even though some men and women do masculinity and femininity in different ways, they remain 'biologically defined' men and women. I found that it is important to draw attention to how heteronormativity and the impression of 'being masculine' or 'being feminine' impact the way in which the students practice intimacy and close friendships.

The practices of intimacy build on the concept of family practices developed by Morgan (2011) whereby the family is not only a part of the social structure or a set of social relationships but involves interactional and intimate practices. Morgan argues that family is something you do rather than something you are in which “the fact that people may ‘do’ family or carry out family practices does not necessarily mean that they willingly chose to do so”. I found this idea to be significant in discussing friendship practices and intimacy in my study. Similarly to Smart (2007), who argues that the patterns of family practices and personal relationships may be shifting in modern society, I found that friendship ties become important in the students’ lives in comparison to other personal relationships as they are living abroad. Instead of focusing only on the meaning behind friendship ties, it is essential to draw attention to the process of building intimacy in friendship, and to explore what the students actually do in their close friendships.

In the study of family practices, the debate on traditional gender roles in nuclear families is usually centred on the man being associated with masculinity and carrying out instrumental roles such as being the breadwinner while the feminine woman performs expressive roles such as providing emotional support, care, affection and love. Focusing on Malaysian family practices, Abdullah et al. (2008) and Noor (1999) in their studies indicate that urban women in Malaysia still follow the traditional and patriarchal roles that are in line with cultural and religious values. Even though nowadays more women are educated and actively involved in economics and political activities, the idea of the man as the breadwinner and head of the household and the woman as the homemaker who

takes care of the children and does the housework is still applied in Malaysian family practices. As masculinity has a hegemonic or dominant status in Malaysia, most gender studies focus on the concept of masculinity instead of femininity (Fazli Khalaf et al. 2013; Goh 2014).

Hammaren and Johansson (2014) argue that the concepts of love, intimacy and affection have been feminized, and masculinity is still defined as the opposite of femininity and homosexuality. This feminine connotation has influenced the ways in which male students in my study practice intimacy and close friendships. Male students seem afraid to practice the idealised expressive and feminine intimacy of close friendships. It is not surprising that one of them, Saiful, mentioned that having a best friend 'sounds gay' to him. He argued that the act of having a specific individual or group of best friends is unusual for men and he prefers not to use the term best friend to categorize his friends in a hierarchy of friendship closeness.

SAIFUL: For me I don't use the term best friend. (HAFEEZA: Why?) Because it sounds gay? I'm just kidding. [Laugh] I think because we are boys and we don't have that kind of concept. I only have some close friends whom I can easily interact with, but I don't have a specific best friend who does everything together with me.

In this case, Saiful, who listed 19 male friends out of 20 close friends in his friendship map, claimed that giving a 'best friend' label in friendship is not properly masculine for him. Even though Saiful listed more friends compared to the female students in this study and had different expectations of his close

friends, I found that to some extent the 'sense of femininity' in the language and practices of friendship had a significant influence on the practices of homosociality – social bonds between persons of the same sex, for Saiful and other male students. The concept of a best friend had 'feminine' connotations and almost all male students did not use it to describe their close friendship. In this case, I argue that a man's practices of masculinity are used to convince others that he is not others of his masculinity. Using 'best friend' sounds childish or feminine to Saiful and some male students. However, Saiful's mocking remark of 'it sounds gay' is a quick gender generalisation. I found that Saiful used the term 'gay' to describe his perception of the unmasculine behaviour of having a best friend. I believe that he did not use the term 'feminine' to describe that behaviour in order to avoid offence, as I, the interviewer, am a woman. Moreover, the negative connotation of gay and the anxiety around sexuality could be related to Saiful's cultural and religion socialisation. This is because homosexuality is not widely accepted in Malaysia especially in Malay culture and is forbidden in Islam (Goh 2014; Stivens 2006), which I discuss in the next section.

In my study, I found that male and female students have different ideals or norms of masculinity and femininity for friendship. There are cultural norms or gender ideologies related to friendships, which are used by men and women to represent their friendships and determine their behaviour. Migliaccio (2009) in his study in the US claims that masculine expectations in friendship are shown by evading expressive interactions with friends and engaging in more physical activities and interests. He argues that males tend to be less likely than females

to self-disclose and to talk about personal issues with their close friends, to openly express their feelings and problems, which might reveal their weaknesses, to show affection to same-gender friends, and to point out the reciprocity in doing friendship. However, cultural norms and gender role ideology, as argued by Migliaccio (2009), do not completely represent what the male students actually do in their friendships. As I have discussed earlier in this chapter, the male students in my study viewed close friendships as feminine, but their friendship practices included some elements of expressive and disclosive intimacy.

IZHAN: Friends are people whom I can have fun with and relieve my stress. People that I can do a lot of things, a lot of activities together. I have friends that I can have fun with, and I have close friends with whom I can share my emotions especially when I feel sad.

JASON: A friend is someone who is willing to listen, someone who sometimes takes their own time to help me out with certain problems, and someone who will always be there to socialize and talk. If I want them to be my shoulder to cry on, they will listen, talk to me and give me advice. They are also someone that I trust and is reasonable. They will put themselves in my situation when I am asking for a favour or anything else.

I consider that shared moments and physical activities, as well as availability in times of need are some of the main factors that influence them to have close ties with their friends. It seems that Izhan and Jason idealise friendship not only in an instrumental form but also in intimate and expressive ways. However, during the interview, Izhan, Jason and most of the male students repeatedly

mentioned that they did not have any complicated personal problems and would prefer not to share them if they had any. Most of the problems shared with their friends are related to study and life in the UK, which seem normal and not too personal to share. Most of the male students believe that confiding personal problems to close friends, in particular, will not solve their problems. I suggest that males may decline to show their weaknesses and affection to a close friend due to the expectation of being a masculine man. This is because behaving in expressive ways, as a female, may be considered 'unmanly'. Indeed, I argue that the ways in which people actually engage with their friends are a reflection of their expected masculine or feminine behaviours as people do gender 'appropriately' when they do friendship.

Migliaccio (2014) suggests that there are limitations to the amount of sharing that is allowed, as well as how friendship and sharing are characterized in men's friendships. Even though most of the male students perceived the ideal form of intimacy in a more feminine way, they avoided sharing their personal stories and problems with their friends. They still portrayed their friendships as 'masculine' and instrumental based on shared interests and activities. In addition, the male students often compared men's friendships with women's friendships and claimed that women are too sensitive and tend to overthink. They assume that women have more personal problems and thus need more close friends to share them with compared to men. Similar to the gender stereotypes that I discussed previously, openness and being expressive are not deemed as masculine behaviour, and thus the male students tend to keep their problems to themselves and find it difficult to share their emotions. Izhan

mentioned that he prefers not to tell his friends about his achievements or his romantic feelings due to his friends' reactions in the past.

IZHAN: I do not like my friends' reactions when other friends tell us about their achievements. They look like they are annoyed and jealous. I feel that there are possibilities for them to react in similar ways if I tell them my happy news or if I have got something that I like. That is why I prefer not to tell my friends about women that I like. I think men are different. They like to joke around and sometimes I do not like it.

Although the male students in my study desire to have more expressive friendships, they still socially construct their interactions in a gendered way. In Izhan's case, the limitation of sharing was more about how he felt his friends might react and how they did react with the use of humour. Migliaccio (2014) suggests that men are influenced by masculine expectations in practising their friendships and the reactions from other male friends, usually through the use of humour, which in this case, restrained the male students from being too expressive in their interactions. However, some mentioned that humour and jokes make them feel emotionally connected with their male friends. Here, Zain mentioned that he shares personal problems with his friends not to find the solution but to feel relieved, as he knows that his friends will keep him calm with jokes.

ZAIN: I do not really have a lot of personal problems. But I remember that, when I get a bad result, my parents will comfort me but my brothers and other male friends make a joke of it. They say that "I know that you are not studying. I only see you

playing a video game". And this kind of joke makes me feel more relaxed and forget about my problems.

The male students in my study socially constructed their interactions in a gendered way based on societal expectation, friends' reactions and their expectations of friendships. Although they idealised expressive friendships in describing their own close friendships, they felt that they were not doing friendship properly if they were too expressive and intimate. It is notable that the idea of gendered expectations in terms of being expressive and showing affection to other male friends not being ideal in men's friendships is relevant to my study. Self-disclosure and expressiveness do not conform to the gender stereotypes of masculine identity, and thus mediate the negative and indirect effects of femininity and sexual identity. Although the male students wanted to have more expressive friendships, they were restricted by the unspoken expectations of hegemonic masculinity as discussed by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) and Donaldson (1993), which particularly, avoids femininity. They feared a feminine form of friendship and thus evaded any actions that equated with being female, which in this case are sharing and being expressive. For that reason, I argue that friendships were a reflection of masculine and feminine acts and the male students draw a distinction between men's and women's friendships.

Nevertheless, expressiveness and intimate talk in friendship are not necessarily gendered in a straightforward dichotomous way. The data shows that it is not totally right to claim that men are not open to sharing personal problems with their friends and vice versa for women. According to Walker (1994) men and

women accept the gender ideologies of women's openness and men's activities for two reasons: 1) disapproval by peers of inappropriate gendered behaviour and 2) people not realizing the differences between ideologies and behaviour, as they do not reflect on their own behaviour. In my study, I found that the students were reluctant to admit to me, as a researcher, that their gender and religious ideologies did not totally reflected in their everyday behavioural practices. Indeed, not all women are emotionally expressive, as I found that some of the female students said they are not expressive enough in their friendships. Aina shared similar views to Izhan, in that she preferred not to tell her friends about her personal problems to avoid judgment and misunderstanding.

AINA: Sometimes I do not tell anyone about my personal problems because I think it is not appropriate. I feel uncomfortable and I do not want people to twist my stories and judge me negatively. And if I tell my parents about my problems, I feel guilty because I know that I should not make them feel worried about me as I live so far away.

Gender role ideology is not the only factor that influences the expressiveness and intimate talk in close friendships as living abroad also builds up ontological insecurity. The students seem to limit their sharing and expressiveness not only because of gendered expectations but also because they want to be seen as independent; capable of handling their own problems as well as avoiding negative reactions from friends and not making other people worry, especially as they live a long way from their families. Besides that, it is important to highlight that women as well as men engaged in activity-based friendships in

my study. Talking and gossiping are part of friendship activities for the male and female students in my study, as well as studying, travelling, shopping and visiting coffee shops. Therefore, I argue that the level of closeness in friendships has more impact on how the male and female students in my study do intimate talk and physical activities, rather than this being exclusively influenced by gender role ideology.

### **Doing Religion in Gendered Ways**

I have discussed the gender dichotomy in the practices of intimacy in friendship. However, like Allan (1989), I consider that gender cannot be discussed separately from other social factors such as ethnicity and religion. I hold the view that gendered behaviour and stereotypes are shaped by culture and religion, and simultaneously they shape the way in which people do friendship. As doing friendship is doing gender, it is important to highlight the impact of culture and religion in the way in which people practise their close friendships. There is very little sociological analysis of the combination of gender, friendship and religion. Therefore, it seems relevant to highlight this in my study. In this section, I argue that religious beliefs and values influence the intimacy practices in cross-gender friendships as well as the development of new close friendships formed abroad.

Even though there is not much discussion about gender, friendship and religion in previous studies, the literature on gender and religion as well as gender and friendship is very significant in order to develop a way of understanding this

context. The discussion on gender and religious homophily as the key factors in close friendships, in Mcpherson et al.'s (2001) study, is significant to mine, although their study did not focus on the discussion around the impact of gender on religious practices. In addition, the discussion on the relation between gender, friendship and freedom of intimacy by Blatterer (2016) serves as a foundation for a further discussion on the impact of a cultural and religious perspective in close friendship practices in my study.

I do not intend to focus solely on how gender and religious homophily impact on the formation and maintenance of friendships or intimacy. Instead, in this section, I explore how religious practices, in particular, influence the ways in which the students do friendship, especially from a gender perspective. I argue that culture and religion create gender identity and shape the way in which they practise friendships, particularly cross-gender close friendships. Religious obligations not only create gender identity but also present limitations for them, especially Muslim students, in terms of having a close friendship with friends of the other gender. Here, Alif mentions that his responsibility towards religion limits him from having a close friendship with women aside from his family members.

ALIF: I have more male friends because I control my female friends. I control my feelings and my thoughts, and my personal stuff. I don't think it is acceptable to share with them. I am trying to limit myself from women, for a religious reason.

As a Muslim man, Alif follows the religious obligation of not having a close friendship with female friends. Religious conventions limit cross-gender friendships outside the family. Simultaneously, the set of friendship practices that follows religious obligations shapes the particular gender identity of the believer. As previously mentioned, Malaysia is a conservative country in which faith in religion forbids young people from engaging in premarital sexual activity, which is considered taboo and conflicting with the local culture (Manaf et al. 2014; Muhammad et al. 2016). For that reason, Alif believes that mixing with the opposite sex is prohibited by the law of Islam, as it may lead to *fitnah* or slandering, as well as the temptation to engage in sexual activity and the committing of indecency and wrongdoing. In order to be devout, Alif controls his cross-gender friendships.

As previously mentioned, religious obligations and obedience require a particular gendered behaviour and by doing religion men and women develop specific characteristics of 'responsible' masculinity and 'sacrificial' femininity, which follow different religious demands (Rao 2015). Indeed, this gendered behaviour is constructed in the family practices and daily routines (Becher 2008). In this case, I argue that the students did not just become a religious subject; they learn to become someone who behaves in gendered ways in order to do religion in a 'proper' manner and to become different types of religious subjects. In agreement with Rao's (2015) and Becher's (2008) findings, I consider that the ways in which Alif practices his religion creates his 'responsible' masculine identity, which is portrayed in his friendship practices. Thus, I argue that Islam shapes a specific gender role ideology, especially in friendship practices.

I argue that as gender socialisation is derived from the cultural and religious practices of individuals, the stereotype that masculine Muslim men in Malaysia are heterosexual as discussed by Goh (2014) influences the way in which the Muslim students in my study practise gender and sexuality. In relation to Saiful's case, which was discussed in the previous section, I argue that cultural values and religious beliefs shape the negative connotations towards homosexuality and create a particular gender and religious identity. Saiful believes that intimate talk and having a best friend are considered as feminine practices that are not acceptable in homosocial interactions. Although Saiful claimed that his argument about unmanly behaviour in friendship practices and gayness was a joke, I argue that these negative views are built around fears of being considered homosexual and shaped by personal values and religious beliefs, as homosexual practices are not socially acceptable and against the Islam and Malaysian law (Stivens 2006; Goh 2014).

In addition, I found that the construction of gender and religious identity could be related to religious socialisation. Besides parental religious socialisation, Krauss et al. (2012) indicate that gender and religious schooling are other prominent factors that influence the level of religiosity of Muslim young people with an average age of 16, in Malaysia. Besides religious obligations, which I discussed above, studying in a religious school appears to have had an impact on the construction of gender identity and the practices of cross-gender friendship. In this case, Lily, a Muslim female student, mentioned that she did not have a lot of male friends since she went to a religious school in Malaysia.

LILY: I do not have a lot of male friends and we are not really close. Most of my male friends think that I am arrogant because I rarely talk to them. When I entered religious school, I did not talk to them anymore. The nature of the school did affect me and I had less conversation with men. I only talk to my classmates, and only for academic reasons. After I finished my high school, I still felt shy talking to men. I think that going to a religious school is one of the main factors for me in having less male friends and other friends from different ethnicities and religions.

Lily's gendered behaviour and disinclination towards cross-gender friendships seems to have been shaped by her religious schooling. This is in agreement with Rao's (2015) findings, which showed that people develop a specific gender identity in order to follow religious demands. Lily claimed that religious schools limits her interactions with cross-gender friends. For that reason, Lily limits herself from establishing close friendships with male friends in order to avoid the violation of the religious school's norms. Although religious socialisation and practices become barriers for cross-gender close friendships, it is important to highlight that religion also serves as a key factor for the formation and maintenance of same-gender friendships.

I found that the students established and maintained their close friendships, especially with same-gender friends, through shared religious values and activities. Armstrong (1987) in her study of women's friendship in Malaysia found that religion helps to strengthen friendship ties among women. Besides their preference for same-gender close friendship, the Malaysian women in her study mentioned that they prefer to have close friends who share a similar way

of thinking, a common background and beliefs in religion. In addition, Armstrong (1987) found that Muslim women in Malaysia form close ties with other Muslim women through Islamic activities and occasions. This is similar to Mcpherson et al.'s (2001) and Cheadle and Schwadel's (2012) study in the US, which highlights that religious homophily is the key factor in developing close friendships. The Muslim students in my study talked about the religious activities called *usrah* or sharing sessions that are conducted once or twice a month that help to strengthen the new close friendships formed abroad. The *usrah* involve fewer than 15 participants in which men and women are separated.

IZHAN: Naz is my *usrah* brother and also my housemate. I really respect him because he conducted our *usrah* and at the same time we can talk about anything aside from religious discussion. I find *usrah* is one of the activities for me to have fun as well as doing sports and travelling. My friends here are really supportive, maybe because our houses are near to each other. It is easier to do activities together here compared to Malaysia.

NORA: I did not list any new friends here, but I am getting closer to one of my course mates, Ama and my *usrah* sister, Lisa. Lisa always makes an effort to get to know me, asks me to go out together, and she introduced me to the *usrah* group. Sometimes, we do the *usrah* session at my house together with my housemates.

Even though Muslim students are not obligated to engage in an *usrah* group, the students claim that it gives them opportunities to make new friends and share their opinions or seek religious, academic or life advice. In this case, I

argue that religious homophily is not only significant in forming new friendships but also in creating an opportunity for close friendship practice and maintenance. When living abroad, the students receive social support through religious and other social activities from new friends in the UK as an alternative to their old friends who are living away from them. Besides family members and long-established close friends, new close friendships formed abroad are the ones that I pay attention to in my study. Therefore, I discuss new and old close friendships in more detail in the next chapter.

Although O'Loughlin (2010) claims that people in contemporary society have more diverse friendship ties as they are less religious and more tolerant, I found that this was not the case in my study. The students in my study consider that obligations and values that derive from cultural and religious practices have significant impacts on the formation of their friendships as well as their practices of intimacy. For that reason, I argue that different cultural and religious practices limit the opportunities for the formation of close friendships. Mohd Hussain (2012) in her study found that Malaysian students in Western Australia put less effort into blending into the local culture and are more concerned with maintaining their religious and cultural identity in their social interactions. Similar to these findings, the students in my study talked about the difficulties of blending into British culture due to their belief in religion and their personal values, especially in relation to drinking alcohol and mixing with the opposite sex. Jenny, who is a Buddhist, shared her opinion regarding the drinking culture and sexual activities.

JENNY: In the first meeting during fresher's week, everyone was drunk and it was chaotic. Personally, I am not comfortable with it. I have a moral conscience and I am not a heavy drinker. So, of course, that stops me from joining in that sort of activity. But, this is the way they click. If you do not drink and join the party, you will be isolated by them. The topic they discussed, for me was totally immature. They talked about sex. Talking about this is not our culture and we abide by this very seriously. When they talked about this, I really felt uncomfortable. I did not give any response. But it made me look anti-social.

Jenny's first experience in encountering cultural differences discouraged her from making more effort to establish close friendships with British students in particular. Although MacLean (2015) found that drinking alcohol is part of friendship-making practices that build intimacy for young people in Australia, this does not represent the findings of my study. Unsurprisingly, my finding is similar to Ngow's (2013) argument that the drinking culture is one of the main reasons that influence international students and causes them to hesitate in mixing with British students. It is important to highlight that Malaysia does not have a drinking culture, and sexual practices are not publicly discussed. Accordingly, I argue that the students put less effort into blending into the British culture and these differences became barriers for them in terms of making close friendships with British students in particular. However, cultural and religious practices are not the main criteria in establishing close friendships. In the next chapter, I discuss how the sense of belonging as well as homophily in space and activities serve as the key factors in the lack of formation of new close

friendships between this group of students and British and other international students.

To conclude this section, I argue that culture and religion create gender identity and shape the way in which the students practise friendships. The gender role ideology of masculinity and femininity presents opportunities and constraints to the students in practising intimacy in close friendships. I found that the gender differences in close friendships are usually rooted in gender socialisation, which is also developed through cultural and religious socialisation. The social position of men and women, which distinguishes the gender roles of masculinity and femininity, had a significant impact on the students' close friendship practices. Therefore, I draw on the conclusion that gender socialisation and expectations shape the ways in which the students practice their friendship. Culture and religion are not only embedded in the lifestyles and values of individuals but also create opportunities and constraints for men and women in terms of how they behave according to the social expectations. Nevertheless, even though gendered behaviour in close friendship practices was found in my study, gender alone cannot explain why the male and female students in my study behave differently in their friendship practices. This is because friendship practices are shaped by cultural expectations and religious socialisation.

### **IT'S BY CHOICE WE BECAME FRIENDS**

The previous section provided a brief overview of the intimacy forms of masculinity and femininity and discussed the impact of cultural and religious

beliefs on gendered behaviour in men's and women's friendships. As explained earlier, I argue that the level of closeness in friendship has more impact on how the male and female students in my study practise instrumental and expressive friendships than gender roles ideologies. Friendship practices are shaped by cultural expectations and religious socialisation. Indeed, gender is not the only factor that affects the gendered behaviour of these students in their friendship practices, and in this section, I highlight their patterns of close friendship while living in the UK. This section identifies the detail in the similarities and differences in male and female students' friendship choices and practices.

There are four notable patterns that I discuss in this section: the number of close friends, the hierarchy of friends and intimacy, cross-gender close friendship, as well as partner as a close friend. This section answers the question of whether male and female students practise friendship differently. Based on the data from the first friendship maps, it is interesting to point out that the male students listed more names of close friends and they distinguished them into different groups, while the female students prefer an individual or small group of close friends. However, I found that both male and female students prefer to confide their personal stories and problems with friends listed on the first and second inner circle of the friendship map which indicates closeness. This seems to support my previous argument that the level of closeness in friendship has more impact on the ways in which the male and female students in my study practice expressive and instrumental friendships, rather than being exclusively influenced by gender role ideology. Most of the close friends in the first and

second inner circle of friendship maps are family members, partners and/or childhood friends.

Male and female students in my study have more same-gender than cross-gender friends. Most of the cross-gender friends listed by the students are family members and partners. In this section, I argue that cross-gender friendships are not about sexual attraction between men and women; rather, this type of friendship provides supplementary support to same-gender friendships or couple relationships especially in academic and daily life. However, it is important to highlight that not all cross-gender friendships are platonic. The female students who had boyfriends considered their partners as best friends, while the male students had listed female friends whom they were sexually attracted to as close friends. The discussion on the gendered patterns of close friendship is based on the summary in Table 3.1 below.

Table 3.1 The Pattern of Close Friendship Based on Gender

Gender	Name	No. of close friends	Friends Gender		Partner	No. of close friends in the Inner Circle						Close friends in certain situations (based on Inner Circle)						
			Male	Female		I	II	III	IV	V	VI	Fun	Sharing News/Stories	Study	R/ship	Financial	Lost/Grieve	Sick/III
MALE	<i>James</i>	12	7	5	No	5	3	2	1	1	-	I, II	I, II	-	-	-	-	I, II
	<i>Jason</i>	20	13	7	No	4	5	2	6	1	2	I, II	I, II	I, II	I, II	-	-	I, II
	<i>Ken</i>	20	7	13	No	8	9	-	-	3	-	I	I, II	-	I	-	-	I, II
	<i>Alvin</i>	20	16	4	No	8	4	3	2	3	-	I, II, III	I	I	I	I	-	I
	<i>Adam</i>	18	13	5	No	6	5	7	-	-	-	I	I, II, III	I, II	III	-	-	I
	<i>Izhan</i>	18	12	6	No	8	6	2	2	-	-	II	I	II	-	I	-	II
	<i>Alif</i>	17	14	3	Yes	6	8	3	-	-	-	I	I, II	II, III	I, II	I	I, II	-
	<i>Zain</i>	17	14	3	No	5	11	1	-	-	-	I, II	II	I, II	II	-	II	II
	<i>Saiful</i>	20	19	1	No	10	6	2	-	2	-	I, II	I	I	I	-	-	I
FEMALE	<i>Yana</i>	13	3	10	Yes	4	3	4	2	-	-	I, II, III	I, II	II	II, III	I	I, II	-
	<i>Jenny</i>	10	4	6	Yes	5	2	3	-	-	-	I	I	I, II	I, II	I	I	I
	<i>Sweeli</i>	13	5	8	Yes	4	9	-	-	-	-	I	I	I	I	-	I	I
	<i>Tiffany</i>	12	6	6	No	1	5	2	2	2	-	II, III	I, II	I, II	II	-	-	II
	<i>Aina</i>	20	6	14	No	1	6	11	2	-	-	III, IV	I, II, III	I, II, III, IV	III, IV	I, II, III, IV	-	-
	<i>Lily</i>	14	1	13	No	3	2	2	4	3	-	I, II	I	I, II	I	-	I, II, III	-
	<i>Nora</i>	9	2	7	Yes	1	1	4	1	2	-	I, III	I, II, III, V	III	I, II, III, IV	V	IV	-
	<i>Fira</i>	15	1	14	No	4	4	7	-	-	-	III	I, II	I	I, II	-	I, II	I
<i>Mila</i>	20	4	16	Yes	4	6	4	2	4	0	II, IV	I, II	I, II, III	I	-	-	-	

### **Quality over Quantity: “I keep my circle small”**

As I have stated in the methodology chapter, I asked the students to list people who are close and important to them and these included family members, friends, neighbours, a partner or housemate. When they came to the first interview, they had decided who they wanted to include and were asked to arrange those names on the first friendship maps. The details gathered provide a better understanding of close friendship patterns and practices, particularly from a gender perspective. Based on Table 3.1 above, the number of close friends ranged widely, from 9 to 20 people. The average number of friends was 16. It is apparent from the table above that 4 out of 9 male students listed 20 close friends, while the others listed 17 and 18 close friends, and 12 close friends as the lowest number. This is different from the female students, who listed fewer close friends, with 14 names on average.

Although Gillespie et al. (2014) claim that there are no significant gender differences in the number of friends, it is interesting to highlight that the male students in my study listed more close friends than the female students. In my study, marriage as one of the structural advantages or constraints for men and women, as discussed in previous studies (Allan 1989; Fischer and Oliker 1983; Gillespie et al. 2014; O'Connor 1992), is not significant. This is because all of the students are young and unmarried, although some of them had a boyfriend or a girlfriend. In my study, the male and female students had similar opportunities and constraints around doing friendship without the gender inequalities associated with career, housework and childbearing, and other

structural constraints that are faced by people at other stages of life, as Fischer and Oliner (1983) and Gillespie et al. (2014) mention.

In the arrangement of the names on the friendship map, nearer to the centre of the concentric circle or the inner circle are the close and important friendships. I found that half of the male students listed more names of their close friends in the first inner circle of the friendship map compared with the female students. From these findings, I argue that the female students prefer to have a small number of close friends compared with male students. In this case, the female students only listed 1 to 5 names in the first inner circle of the friendship maps, compared with the male students, who listed 4 to 10 names. Yana and Sweeli talked about their reasons for having a small number of close friends in the quotes below.

YANA: I prefer to have a small group of friends because it is easier to keep in touch and be there for each other. If there are many people, I tend to not have a very close relationship with each and every one of them. It is also quite hard to meet up and to plan activities together. I am also very choosy when it comes to friends. It is difficult for me to open up to people. So, a small group of friends works for me.

SWEELI: I only used two circles on this map because I prefer to have a smaller network of friends. The first circle is for friends whom I have felt closer to recently and the second circle is my high school friends whom I meet once a year. I feel closer to friends in the first circle because we share similar ways of thinking and they can understand me more than other friends.

Yana and Sweeli's quotes above represent the view of the majority of the female students regarding the inclination towards having a small number of close friendships. The female students are more selective in choosing their close friends compared to the male students. They perceive someone as close and intimate not only in terms of openness, intimate talk and mentality but also in terms of shared activities and the length of the friendship. These are some criteria of ideal qualities of intimacy that the students expected in close friendships. Accordingly, I would restate my argument that the definition of 'close' and 'intimate' friendship for female students does not follow the gender stereotype of expressive friendship, as I discussed in the previous section. This is because the qualities of close friendships are not only built on expressiveness, intimate talk and self-disclosure but also through activity-based friendship practices and instrumental support.

In addition, it is significant to highlight that the male and female students in my study had a small number of close friends that were listed on the first inner circle compared with the other circles of the friendship maps. However, I found that the female students had fewer close friends than the male students. For that reason, I argue that gender differences are notable in my study. However, I did not find any impact of gender on the female students' preferences in terms of having a smaller network. Gender is not a significant factor in having a small circle of close friends because it is mainly influenced by personality. Here, Mila talked about her introvert personality, which makes her prefer to have a smaller group of close friends. She did not have frequent contact with her friends and this was the reason for having less intimate talk.

MILA: When I meet new people for the first time, I will take some time to talk to them. It is maybe because I am a little bit introverted. I only have a few best friends. Although I think that I am close to them, I actually do not contact them frequently. I prefer not to tell every single thing about my personal life to everyone.

In this case, I argue that lack of contact as well as distinct social and physical space have weakened the practices of intimacy. Mila and other students have fewer opportunities to practice the ideal qualities of intimacy with their friends as they had infrequent contact, either via face-to-face or online. Gender is not the main reason for having a small circle of close friends. I argue that my findings slightly contradict the typical gender analysis in previous friendship studies, which claimed that men have more friends than women but fewer intimate and affectionate friendships (Fischer and Oliner 1983; Gillespie et al. 2014; O'Connor 1992). It is vital to highlight that the male students in my study not only listed more friends than the female students but also claimed that these friends were important close friends. As I have discussed earlier in this chapter, I emphasise my argument that there are no gender differences in describing the ideal intimacy qualities of close friendships. However, the hierarchy of friends and intimacy that I discuss in the next section show a significant difference in terms of gendered behaviour.

### **Close or Best Friends: The Hierarchy of Intimacy**

Previously, I argued that the gender role ideology of masculinity and femininity is not the only factor that shapes men's and women's close friendships. I

consider that the level of closeness in friendship has more impact on how male and female students practise instrumental and expressive friendships. Based on Table 3.1, I found that the male students not only listed a larger number of close friends but they also arranged most of their friends' names in the first and second inner circles of their friendship maps. In contrast, the female students listed fewer close friends as well as arranging fewer names in those inner circles on the friendship maps. Therefore, gendered patterns were reported in the hierarchy of friendship and intimacy in my study, which shows that female students not only prefer to have small groups of close friends, but they also prefer to distinguish their friendships based on the hierarchy of intimacy, which is illustrated by the different inner circles on the friendship maps.

In addition, the female students in my study repeatedly used the term 'best friend' and 'close friend' to describe their friendship hierarchy. Best friends in this case mostly refer to friends listed in the first and second inner circles, while close friends refer to friends listed in other circles of the friendship maps. However, some male students in my study claimed that intimacy in friendships is not determined by using those terms – as I have discussed as 'the fear of intimacy' earlier in this chapter. The male students acknowledged that they are close to some groups of friends, but this does not mean that they treat their friends differently. I found that some of the male students claimed that they have some close friends but never acknowledge them as best friends. In this case, Izhan and Alvin shared a similar view that using the term 'best friend' to differentiate their friendships was a practice of favouritism, as they do not really disclose their problems intimately, only to some best friends.

IZHAN: I never label anyone as my best friend or just a friend. Because for me everyone is the same. I can differentiate who I am closer to, and who I am not. But I never give labels like “he is my best friend”, and “he is my friend”.

ALVIN: I don't have best friends actually. I don't choose my best friends. Everyone has the opportunity to be my close friend. There is nothing you can do that can make me treat you differently. I will treat you the same; it's just the things I tell you will be different.

From the quotes above, it can be seen that Izhan and Alvin felt that it was inappropriate to treat friends differently by using specific terms to distinguish their closeness and intimacy. The matter of favouritism in friendship addresses the issue of hierarchy in friendship and intimacy. Like Migliaccio (2014), I consider that the language of friendships and intimacy are female-biased. This could be associated with Saiful's claim, stated previously, that 'best friend sounds gay'. Hence, I argue that male students prefer not to use the term 'best friend' to describe their friendships, as they think it is effeminate. The presence of boundaries in disclosing intimacy influences how people treat others as 'close' and 'special' (Jamieson 2005). This concurs with my findings as the male students in my study did not perceive their close friends as their 'best friends' and limit their intimate interaction with male friends.

As I have discussed earlier in this chapter, self-disclosure is a part of the process of building the qualities of intimacy in which disclosing self and intimacy are associated with high levels of trust, and people usually relate intimacy by keeping 'others' at a distance. According to Alvin's and Saiful's level of

friendship map, I found that they did not treat their friends differently but they have different expectations towards friends based on their level of trustworthiness. This finding shows conflicting ideas of the hierarchy of intimacy.

In contrast to Bank and Hansford's (2000) study in the US, I found that men's same-gender friendships are intimate and supportive, similar to women's. However, my research confirms their findings that although men idealise intimate and supportive friendships as more enjoyable, masculine identity, homophobia as well as limitations in expressing emotions impact on the level of intimacy and support in friendships. Masculinity influences the level of affection and concern, but there are no significant impacts on support in same-gender friendships. Men tend to avoid self-disclosure as well as being intimate and supportive, as they are avoiding what they view as effeminate behaviour.

Nevertheless, Table 3.1 shows that the male and female students in my study prefer to confide their personal stories and problems to their close friends listed in the first and second inner circles on the friendship map. Although the male students listed a higher number of close friends compared to the female students, all of them said that they only share their problems and happiness with certain friends. Alif shared his problems with most of his friends. However, the friends in the first inner circle of the friendship map are the only friends that know the exact problems that he has.

ALIF: Friends listed here are people who know my true self, someone whom I feel comfortable with and someone whom I tell my problems to. Friends in the first inner circle are people

who know the whole picture of my stories or problems. They will consult me when I need their opinion. It does not mean that I will accept their opinion. I just want someone to hear my stories. And maybe because we share the same mentality, they understand me and my situation.

Alif mentioned that his close friends listed in the first circle share a similar way of thinking and personality. He feels comfortable talking about personal matters and disclosing his intimacy with those close friends as they are trustworthy and good listeners. Similar to Alif, Saiful added that similarity in terms of humour and jokes, as well as the length of time they have known each other are other reasons for the inclusion of his male friends in the first inner circle. This is similar to Spencer and Pahl's (2006) arguments that a close friend can be someone who is emotionally close, the most reliable, fun and trustworthy, as well as someone with whom you have most in common and have known for the longest time.

SAIFUL: Honestly, I group my friendships by looking at how I interact and share my personal things with them, and how we make jokes with each other. I have known all of my friends in the first inner circle since high school. We are very close until now. And I included some of my friends in the UK because we lived in the same hall last year. We got close to each other and I can share my personal problems with them.

However, Saiful's claim in the previous section that 'best friend sounds gay' appears to contradict his quote above. Throughout the interview, I found that he was selective in arranging the names of his close friends according to the

different levels on the friendship map and the way he practises his friendships does not totally follow the masculine ideologies in which he believes. I argue that the male students in my study believe in gender stereotypes with regard to women's friendships and they avoid feminine practices, such as using the term best friend, as they are more intimate and expressive. However, as Walker (1994) found in her study, I also found that the male students had different expectations towards friends on different levels of the friendship maps, as mentioned by Alvin below.

ALVIN: I set the first criteria for friendship as trustworthiness. If I can trust you, I will tell you my problems and my secrets. And I expect you to keep my stories secret. I expect you to be there when I need you. The level of trust might decrease for friends in the outer circle. I have fewer expectations of them as well.

It is important to highlight that the male students have a set of expectations or ideal qualities of intimacy in close friendships especially to close friends listed on the first inner circle of the friendship maps. I found these ideal qualities of intimacy challenge the 'masculine qualities' in friendships claimed by the male students as I have discussed earlier in this chapter. I restate my argument that people actually do something a little bit different from gender role ideology in doing friendship. Throughout the interviews, I found that male students wanted to show the 'masculine' side of their close friendships. However, I still found that they are longing for 'feminine' acts in close friendships especially when they talked about their expectations of loyalty, trust, reciprocity and support.

Nevertheless, it is essential to point out that the students tend to keep their personal problems to themselves, especially issues related to finance, grief and illness, although they are more open to sharing problems related to study and relationships. Besides the trust issue, both male and female students tried to avoid sharing personal problems in order to avoid misunderstandings, conflicts and judgement. Here, James talked said it was easier to share with his western friends about his parents' divorce and his illness compared to his Malaysian friends. He remarked that his western friends are more open to discussing sensitive issues.

JAMES: It's hard for me to have close friendships with them compared to my Malaysian friends. But they are more open to discussing sensitive issues. Even though we are not close to each other, it is easy to talk about my parents' divorce and to tell them that I have been diagnosed with schizophrenia. My Malaysian friends are not judgmental, but it is uncommon to talk about these issues if you are not really close to each other.

However, there are slight gender differences in terms of choosing friends for fun activities. All of the male students listed their friends from the first and second inner circles, but some of the female students only listed friends from the second, third and fourth circles for fun activities. I found that the main reason for this gendered pattern is physical distance. Aina and Mila, who listed more LD friends as close friends, said that they choose to have fun with GC close friends, especially their housemates because they cannot do activities that require physical contact with LD close friends.

AINA: Having fun here is different from having fun in Malaysia. I have my parents and my sister to have fun with. But here, it depends on my friends' availability. Usually, I have fun with my housemate. This year, I hang out more with my new housemate, Zaza, and last year with my ex-housemate, Fatin. We went out together to eat, watch films and shop.

MILA: Most of my friends are in Malaysia, so it is quite difficult to meet them. I try to meet all of them during the summer break and we have fun together. But here, I do not think that I have really close friends. So, usually, I have fun with my housemates. We go out to eat, shop and travel together.

Closeness, is not specifically linked to physical distance, as Aina and Mila did not yet perceive GC friends as close friends but as an alternative to LD close friends especially for physical activities such as shopping and travelling which required face-to-face contact. For that reason, I draw the conclusion in my study that physical distance does impact the ways in which the students practise close friendship and the discourse around this issue will be presented in the succeeding chapter.

Moreover, even though some of the male students did not agree with the usage of the term 'best friend' to explain close friendships, activity-based and intimate talk in friendships were not particularly distinguished by gender at this stage of the students' lives. It is not evident at this particular time and at this age, but it might be distinguished by gender later when people have children and talk about their children or partners, as indicated by Cronin (2015a). Indeed, it depends on the hierarchy of intimacy between the students and their friends.

The highlight of my findings is that both the male and female students in my study preferred to turn to close friends in the first and second inner circles on the friendship map whether to share happy news and have fun together or to share their problems and sadness. My findings also concur with Gillespie et al.'s (2014) research, which found that there are no significant gender differences in instrumental and expressive friendships. This is because both the male and female students in my study perceived close friends as people they trust to share their personal matters as well as people with whom they could have fun with in certain activities.

### **Cross-gender: Being Just Friends**

In the earlier section of this chapter, I discussed the impact of cultural expectations and religious obligations on cross-gender friendships. Cultural and religious practices shape the ways in which the students, especially Muslim ones, practise their close friendships with friends from different genders. Based on Table 3.1, I identified that almost all of the students listed more same-gender than cross-gender friends as close friends. The most striking result to emerge from this study is that none of the students had one specific close friend from a different gender. Most of the cross-gender friends were described as a group of schoolmates, classmates or flatmates, and not as an individual. Moreover, none of the cross-gender friends were listed in the first inner circle of the friendship map, except for family members and partners. Ken was the only student who listed more female friends than other male students and Tiffany was the only student who listed a similar number of male and female friends as close friends.

Although cross-gender friendships in my study are not primarily intimate, I argue that this type of friendship is not only built around the idea of sexual attraction between men and women as argued by O'Meara (1989). Instead, this type of friendship and heterosocial interactions provide supplementary support to same-gender friendships or couple relationships, especially in academic and daily life.

As pointed out earlier in the previous section, Gillespie et al. (2014) claim that there are no significant gender differences in terms of number of friends. However, they also found that gendered expectations for same-gender and cross-gender friendships are not obvious. People no longer rely completely on friends based on their gender roles to get physical help or emotional support because same-gender friends are available to provide various types of expressive and instrumental support. In that case, they indicate that women have more same-gender than cross-gender friends. In line with Gillespie et al.'s (2014) findings, it is not surprising that most of the male friends listed by the female students, especially in the first inner circle of the friendship map, were family members and partners. The female students in my study said that they only had a small number of male friends and stated that their fathers, brothers and partners already gave them sufficient expressive and instrumental support that they might otherwise need from close male friends. Although almost all of the female students listed more same-gender friends, some of them mentioned that they prefer to be friends with men rather than with women as men are less sensitive and available to help when they need them.

SWEELI: I have a lot of male friends, although I did not list all of them here. Some of them are my brother's friends. They always help me and ask me if I need any help. Some of my female friends do not like me because I have a lot of male friends. At that moment, I think that it is hard to make friends with women. Women like to overthink and I know that they will be good in front of you but they will also stab you in the back.

MILA: I think it is much easier to get some help from male friends because they are less sensitive and willing to help you without any reasons. But it is different for female friends. I need to talk nicely to them and cannot be too direct. If not, they will be offended.

Sweeli and Mila shared a similar idea that men are less sensitive and emotional than women, which makes them feel more comfortable making jokes or asking for help. In this case, I argue that female students' friendship practices may be more gendered when interacting with male friends. I found that gender stereotypes of women as sensitive and emotionally expressive influenced the way in which Sweeli, Mila and other students practised cross-gender friendships. Despite the fact that Reeder (2003) argues that feminine people, whether they are men or women, have more female friends, while masculine people have more male friends, I would not describe Sweeli and Mila as masculine women just because they prefer to be friends with men. However, I argue that the fact that they prefer to get instrumental support from male friends shows that they idealise the distinct roles of men and women in their friendship practices.

Contrary to the female students, the majority of those who listed their family members and partners as their only male friend/s, all of the male students in my

study listed at least one cross-gender close friend. Even though the male students also included their family members as close friends, most of their cross-gender friends were classmates from high school, college or university. However, they have fewer cross-gender close friends than same-gender friends. In this case, my study challenges Morimoto and Yang's (2013) findings, which indicate that there is little possibility of men choosing other men as close friends. Here, Izhan and Adam share a similar reason for having fewer female friends.

IZHAN: I am not really close to my female friends because the level of closeness is different for men and women. I cannot be too close to them like I am with my male friends. I feel uncomfortable. Maybe because I went to a single-sex school, so I feel more comfortable with male friends. I can talk about everything with them, but with women, I need to control myself. I cannot make harsh jokes because women are too sensitive and they might take my jokes the wrong way. They might think that I am too rude and they cannot accept the way I joke around. Women have too much drama and gossips. They like to make small things complicated. That is why I try to put a limit on it.

ADAM: I went to a single-sex school when I was in primary until middle-high school. When I moved to Kuala Lumpur, I had a few female friends during high school. I do not really have a lot of close female friends. They are not interested in sport and business, but we share the same interest in music. Every day we brought our guitars and sung together. We became closer because of this similar interest.

These male students had fewer female friends due to not having common interests and similar humour. As I discussed previously, Migliaccio (2014)

claims that humour is common in the interactions between men. However, it is also essential to point out that the ways in which people make and accept jokes and humour is gendered. Men and women react to in different ways, for example, Robinson and Smith-lovin (2001) in their study found that men particularly enjoyed sexist humour more than women. In view of that, Maclean (2015), in her study, indicates that in order to establish cross-gender close friendships, people need to avoid jokes or talk that objectifies women or uses specific stereotypes of women. From Izhan's quote above, I found that he had already built up impressions and stereotypes towards women as oversensitive and overthinking. Izhan did not put much effort into avoiding sexist jokes. Instead, he controlled and limited his interactions with female friends and claimed that it was hard to form and maintain close friendships with them.

In addition, my study shows that single-sex schooling seems crucial in gender socialisation especially in determining the inclination towards cross-gender close friendship. In relation to the previous discussion on gender and religion, I argue that the students' upbringing when they are in school shaped the ways in which they chose and performed their cross-gender close friendships. In Adam and Izhan's case, single-sex schools had not only limited the number of cross-gender friendships but also influenced the ways in which they practice gender and intimacy in friendship. Adam and Izhan pointed out that they felt more comfortable with male friends as they do not need to control themselves in their interactions. However, as Adam mentioned that he developed cross-gender friendships with female friend through music activities, I reaffirm my argument that activity-based friendships are not only for men. In this case, homophily in

terms of hobbies and interests are some of the key factors in establishing cross-gender close friendships.

Although O'Meara's (1989) research on the challenges to cross-gender friendships is quite old, I found that his findings are relevant to my study. He describes five challenges for heterosexual men and women in cross-gender friendships: opportunity, sexuality, emotional connection, gender inequality and presenting their relationship in public. He claims that men and women feel the need to engage in strategies to demonstrate to others that their friendship is not sexual, and cross-gender friendships can provoke jealousy in romantic relationships or marriage, confuse friends and family members, as well as the two people involved. In my study, Sweeli mentioned that her best friend Steven, who she has known since high school, did have romantic feelings towards her but both of them had discussed this and decided to remain as best friends.

SWEELI: I know that Steven has a crush on me, but I do not have any feelings towards him. He is my best friend and I have known him since high school. He told me about his feelings and we did talk about this. And now we already have our own partners, but we still treat each other as close friends.

It is not surprising that Sweeli tried to put some limit on her friendship with Steven because she only had platonic feelings towards him. O'Meara (1989) and Gillespie et al. (2015), consider that it is hard to avoid sexual attraction in cross-gender friendships. Gillespie et al. (2015) found that their heterosexual participants reported more same-gender than cross-gender friends in order to avoid the sexual attraction and tension in friendship. Even though people try to

keep their friendships and sexual relationships separate, sexual feelings and tensions still exist in many heterosexual cross-gender friendships.

In my research, Sweeli's efforts to openly discuss this matter with Steven stopped the emotional bonding in their close friendship from being affected. Openness in cross-gender friendships is one of the strategies to avoid confusion and jealousy as both Sweeli and Steven already have partners. Accordingly, I argue that the practices of intimacy are one of the main challenges in cross-gender friendships. Here, Alif, who only listed three of his female friends as close friends, mentioned that he feels bad claiming that he has close friendships with his female friends because he listed their names as important friends only for academic reasons.

ALIF: I do not regard any female friends as really close friends. They are important in my life because I need them for a certain reason, especially in my study. But, they are not the people whom I deal with for my daily problems, my thoughts or my personal interest.

In this case, Alif claimed that they grow closer as friends in term of academic life, but he did not share his personal problems or anything related to emotions with his female friends. Therefore, it is important to highlight that cross-gender friendships in my study are important for academic and daily support, but I found that this type of friendship is not as intimate as same-gender friendships. Even though the students listed some of their cross-gender friends as close friends, they still preferred to have more same-gender friends due to a lack of homophily in interests, hobbies, sense of humour and mentality. Nevertheless, I argue that

emotional bonding did place limits on cross-gender friendships. Too much emotional bonding leads to sexual attraction and I discuss this type of friendship in the next section.

### **“My partner, my best friend”**

Although O’Meara (1989) defines cross-gender friendship as a non-romantic, non-familial and personal relationship between a man and a woman, my study found this to be a little different and not all cross-gender friendships are platonic because partners were also listed as close friends in my study. In addition, one student mentioned her male best friend had been attracted to her as discussed in the previous section. Although my participants are not yet married, most of them had a boyfriend or a girlfriend. 5 out of 9 female students listed their boyfriends as close friends and almost all of them arranged their boyfriends’ names in the first inner circle of the friendship maps. This is similar to Pahl’s study in which he found that people tend to describe their partner or spouse as their best and closest friend (see Pahl 2002; Pahl and Pevalin 2005; Pahl and Spencer 2004).

In their previously mentioned friendship study in the UK, Spencer and Pahl (2006) pointed out the remarkable concept of *suffusion*, which describes the blurred boundaries between friends and family, for example, a friend can be considered ‘like a sister’, or a brother may be considered a friend. Similar to this concept, they claim that partners may share a similar role with friends or be more aligned with family members. My study shows that the students perceived

their partners as their best friend due to a sense of connection and companionship as partners play a suffused role as friends and family as companions, confidants and a source of support. Accordingly, it is unsurprising that the female students who had boyfriends considered their partners as their best friends. Even though all of them had a group of best friends, they mentioned that they prefer to tell their news and problems to their boyfriends instead of other close friends.

In contrast to Yana and Sweeli, Nora, Mila and Jenny shared a similar situation in having a group of best friends in Malaysia. They did not consider their new friends abroad as best friends. They talked about their loneliness when living abroad, which led them to spend more time with their partners to the extent that they considered their best friends. Nora remarked that she had got closer to her boyfriend since both of them decided to further their studies together in the UK.

NORA: I don't have anyone to hang out with and I feel lonely. I only have my boyfriend here, but it is not the same as having my best friends in Malaysia. When I feel lonely, I have no-one to talk to and to go out with. Sometimes I feel sad when I see my housemates grow really close to each other. I don't know whether I have already put a hundred percent effort into getting closer to them. I don't want to push it. It will come naturally.

Nora and her boyfriend studied at the same university and took the same academic course; thus, they met each other frequently and did most of their daily activities together. Although she lives with other Malaysian students in the same house, she does not have a close relationship with them due to engaging

in less interaction and activity with them. For that reason, Nora felt lonely and did not have close friends with whom to do 'women's activities' such as shopping, intimate talking and hanging out together. Despite their closeness as a couple, Nora still thought that her boyfriend was unable to replace her female best friends in Malaysia in terms of women's activities. Meanwhile, for Jenny, her relationship with her boyfriend is still new and she prefers to spend her time with him rather than with her classmates and flatmates. For that reason, she did not have a close friendship with new friends in the UK and she claimed that most of her best friends were in Malaysia.

JENNY: My boyfriend helped me to settle down when I first came to the UK. I came here alone without my parents, so I literally did not know anyone here. I do not have many close friends here, so I prefer to have fun and go out with him. My friends are always busy. That is why I always ask my boyfriend and I am really grateful that I have him here.

In contrast to Jenny and Nora, who have boyfriends that live in the UK and study at the same university, Mila mentioned that her boyfriend knows everything that happens to her although her boyfriend is not in the UK, as they frequently interact through social media.

MILA: I share about almost everything that happens to me with my boyfriend. Even though he is in Australia, we contact each other every day. He is a very good listener and he usually gives his opinion to solve my problems. I do not expect him to solve my problems; I just want someone to listen to my story. If I tell my friends here my problems or that I have got a good result

for my study, they might feel burdened, annoyed or offended.  
So, I prefer not to tell them.

Mila argued that she did not prefer to share her personal problems with her friends in the UK as their friendships are still new and she had not yet established trust with them. In addition, she also said that she did not want to destroy the friendship by over-burdening them. From these three cases, I argue that Nora, Jenny and Mila cannot invest more intimacy towards their new friends in the UK as they invest most of their time and emotional closeness with their partner. This is in line with Cronin's (2015) findings which state that people practise intimacy as a zero-sum game in which investing in intimacy in one type of relationship requires an equal reduction of intimacy for other relationships. For that reason, I argue that heteronormativity influences the way in which couples shape their friendships and invest their intimacy and emotional bonding, as Nora, Jenny and Mila tend to prioritise their partners above their close friendships.

On the other hand, Alif as the only male student who had a partner did not list his girlfriend's name as one of his close friends. He argued that he prefers not to share personal problems with his girlfriend or female friends due to his introvert personality and religious obligation, as I discussed earlier in the gender and religion section.

ALIF: I control my female friends, so that is the reason why I did not include my girlfriend in this context.

Nevertheless, it is notable to highlight that the male students in my study reported having female friends to whom they are sexually attracted. This is similar to Bleske-rechek et al.'s (2012) findings, which state that young men are sexually attracted to their women friends, regardless of their own or their friend's current relationship status. In this case, I use the term 'crush' to explain this type of relationship, which usually involves a one-way sexual attraction.

In contrast to Alif who has a girlfriend, Jason, who had just broken up with his girlfriend, mentioned that he still contacts her ex-girlfriend because he still considers her as one of his important and close friends, although they are no longer together.

JASON: I would not tell anyone about my big secret. I do not think that people should know about it. I think the one that I trust the most is Tina, my ex-girlfriend. We just broke up two months ago, but I still consider her as special. We are so close like we can share almost anything and accept each other. We have known each other for three years. I can be myself with other friends, but I feel most comfortable talking with her.

Jason mentioned that the reason why he contacted her even though they are no longer a couple is that they have known each other for a long time and they always share problems with each other. He considers her as special and different from other relationships. Meanwhile, Izhan, who is in a complicated relationship with his ex-girlfriend, said that he did not contact her, but lately he had frequent contact with his crush. However, he did not yet perceive his crush as an important close friend as they were not yet in a romantic relationship. He

still cannot share his personal matters with her, and therefore he put her name in an outer circle in the friendship map.

While Ken shared a similar situation to Izhan, he perceived his crush, Ling, as important and intimate. Ling is listed in his first inner circle on his friendship map even though they are not yet in a relationship. Ken mentioned that he had a problem with the scholarship and he shared his problems with her. Therefore, he felt emotionally connected with her as she was always available and caring.

KEN: When I got the scholarship, I needed to find a guarantor to sign the contract, but my family could not fulfil the terms. Nobody could help me including my relatives. At that moment only Ling knew about this problem. I had other problems as well, so I was stressed out and I did not want anybody to know about this. I told Ling about my problems because I could not stand the problems anymore. I was so sad and I cried in front of her. After that, I felt relieved and appreciated her support, and I trusted her more than before.

I found that couple relationships were remarkable in my study as the students not only included their boyfriends and girlfriends but also their crushes as important and close friends. It is interesting to highlight that only male students listed their crushes as close friends. Similar to Bleske-rechek et al.'s (2012) findings, I argue that attraction in cross-gender friendships can be both a benefit and burden. Jason, Izhan and Ken kept the emotional bond with their female friends, but simultaneously it was a complicated relationship for them.

To conclude this section, it is important to highlight that in this study, partners share some of the ideal qualities of the intimacy of friends and family. In this case, partners give both instrumental and expressive support, and thus they are perceived as important and close friends. Even though the partners discussed in my study were not related by marriage, they were deemed as important in the students' lives as they are living abroad and need to face challenges alone without family members and long-established friends. Although most of them described their partners as more than a best friend, none of the students described their partners as family members. Therefore, a deeper discussion of the suffusion of categorization between friends and families will be presented in the succeeding chapter.

## **CONCLUSION**

This chapter began by describing men's and women's friendships and arguing that the male and female students in my study idealise masculinity and femininity in distinct ways. It went on to suggest that the significance of gender appears as part of an ideal or norm and the process of identity construction. I argue that friendships are a space in which people construct their gender and sexual identities, and simultaneously gender shapes the way in which friendships are formed and maintained. This chapter has reviewed three key debates regarding gender in relation to friendship practices: 1) the practices of friendships are complicated around gender, 2) culture and religion create gender identity and shape the way in which the students practise their close friendships and 3) there are some gendered patterns in close friendships. I draw

on the conclusion that friendship practices are complicated around gender, as the students' idealisation of masculinity and femininity did not appear in their close friendship practices. Men tend to avoid being emotionally expressive in their close friendships especially with same-gender friends as these practices are not deemed as 'masculine'. However, they seek an emotionally bonded relationship with certain close friends, especially those who were listed in the first inner circle of the friendship maps.

Besides that, I consider that gender is inseparable from other social factors, for example, culture and religion, as these aspects influence gender identity and shape the ways in which the students practice their friendships. Cultural norms and religious beliefs influence the practices of intimacy and gender in close friendships especially in cross-gender friendships which result in gendered close friendship patterns. I argue that the ways in which people practice gender when they interact and engage with their close friends portray cultural messages and beliefs regarding gender. People do gender by taking up a role and acting it out, and religious people do religion in gendered ways. In this context, close friendship practices represent a place where gender role ideology and inequality are enacted on a regular basis.

I argue that gendered friendship patterns in this study are based on a number of friends, the hierarchy of intimacy, as well as cross-gender and couple relationships are influenced by cultural expectations and gender socialisation. However, my study shows that the male students listed more close friends than the female students in total, and they also listed more names of close friends in

the first inner circle of their friendship maps. So, the generalisation that men have fewer close friendships and are less emotive than women appear not to be the case.

Cross-gender close friendships are not common for both male and female students in my study. Religious and cultural socialisation has influenced the inclusion of cross-gender friends as close friends as the students limit the interaction with friends from opposite sex by following the specific rules and obligations in their religion as well as cultural norms. This finding shows that Malaysian culture and religious beliefs are still embedded in students' intimacy practices in close friendships. However, some of the students who have partners perceived their boyfriends or crushes as close friends. Moreover, living abroad has strengthened the relationships between two of the female students and their partners as they give support to each other as they live away from home. Hence, in the following chapter, I discuss the ideal qualities of intimacy and 'familiarity as a family' in close friendships.

## **CHAPTER FOUR IDEAL QUALITIES OF INTIMACY AND ‘FAMILIARITY AS A FAMILY’**

In the previous chapter, I argued that the students constructed their gender and sexual identities in friendship practices, and at the same time gender has shaped the ways in which they practise intimacy in friendship. Part of the discussion highlighted the impact of gender as well as cultural and religious practices in friendship patterns and intimate practices. I argued that friendship practices are complicated around gender in which male and female students have different ideals or norms of masculinity and femininity for friendship in general. However, this idealisation did not appear in the practices of close friendship. The male students in my study stated that they avoid behaviour they see as effeminate which includes the act of being expressive and showing affection to other male friends as these acts are the opposite of ideal practices of Malaysian masculinity in men’s friendships. However, in some contexts, I found that they are longing for intimacy and practising those supposedly effeminate acts with particular close friends. Indeed, my findings showed that male students listed more friends in total and more names of close friends – which were placed in the first inner circle of their friendship maps, compared to female students. Accordingly, I argued that it is incorrect to make a general assumption that men are less emotionally expressive and have fewer close friendships than women, as claimed in past studies (Fischer and Oliner 1983; Gillespie et al. 2014; O’Connor 1992).

This chapter addresses what it means to be intimate; how Malaysian students practice intimacy in close friendships; and the differences in intimacy practices for different types of close friends. In the context of students' temporary mobilities abroad, what changes are brought by distance in the way in which Malaysian students idealise and practise intimacy in close friendships; and who are included and excluded as close friends? Indeed, many questions arose from the discussion of intimacy practices in the previous chapter. Intimacy is socially constructed and it varies between cultures. In the specific context of living abroad, I argue that the students seek intimacy and its ideal practices. Intimacy as a 'practice' is central to my analysis. Therefore, in this chapter, I explore how the students practice intimacy in different types of friendships and unpack what 'close friendship' means to them.

I look at intimacy in terms of *relationships* – which includes the discussion on families, old friends and new friends, as well as *practices* – the acts of being intimate and close, and *spaces* – what people do and where these practices of intimacy take place, and examine how these and other discursive elements produce specific experiences and relationalities that come to be recognised by the students as 'intimacy'. I contend that the conceptualisation of intimacy in my study is different from any other studies as my focus is on Malaysian students' mobilities abroad, in the UK. My argument concurs with Jamieson who refers to intimacy as "the quality of close connection between people and the process of building this quality" (Jamieson 2011, p.1). I draw on *self-disclosure* as one of the necessary processes to develop intimacy in personal relationships. However, my argument further suggests that intimacy is not just about sharing

emotions through talking or touching, I also consider the influence of cultural and religious ideas and practices on sojourners.

A significant aspect of the theories of intimacy is that they show how it might also be produced and practised through sharing similar spaces, situations, experiences, familiarity and sensibilities in living abroad. In this chapter, I pay my attention to the ways in which the students produce and practise intimacy with their close friends. I have categorised these intimacy practices into three types of close friends: 1) blood-related family members and 2) long-established friends back home, which will foreground my discussion in the first section, and 3) new friends formed in the UK which I will discuss in the second section. Here, my discussion draws on Spencer and Pahl's (2006) concept of *suffusion* as a foundation.

“[...] we discover that family ties may have friend-like qualities and, conversely, that friends may feel like family. Not only can there be a blurring of boundaries, but this process of suffusion is sometimes acknowledged in the way people talk about these relationships, for example, calling a cousin a friend, or a friend a sister” (Spencer and Pahl 2006, p.108)

Although I agree with Spencer and Pahl's concept of suffusion, I argue that it is actually a lack of vocabulary to draw on to emphasize the strength of particular relationships. My study highlights that the ways in which the students defined and practised intimacy are different for different types of close friends. I found that not all close friendships acquired the ideal intimacy qualities as not all family members are seen as best friends and not all close friends are referred to as

family members. Further, it is hard to explain some relationships; for example, some students described their co-national new close friendships that are established abroad as 'family', which I found different in the way it is used in long-established close friendships.

In this chapter, I explore how old and new close friendships are formed and sustained based on several significant life events experienced by the students. These events include parents' divorce, financial crisis and mental illness, as well as living abroad which is the main focus of my study. In addition to gender practices in close friendships that I have discussed in the previous chapter, the key debates that emerged throughout my empirical work also include issues of homophily, status homophily – ethnicity, religion, age and nationality, as well as value homophily, which is based on values, attitudes, and beliefs (McPherson et al. 2001).

Culture and religion shape the way in which the students practise close friendships, a fact I found significant in the formation and maintenance of transnational, co-national and inter-ethnic friendships. My participants talked about the time of living abroad as a time in which their identities and social positioning, as well as their practices of intimacy and close friendships were changing. Moreover, sharing similar social space and doing physical activities together has transformed the new friendships formed abroad into close friendships as well as changed the ways in which students describe the strength of close friendships in the family and long-established friendships. Accordingly, in this chapter, I discuss the changes brought about by temporary mobilities,

based on the ways in which the students define intimacy and describe their close friendships.

I highlight two key arguments in order to explore questions of intimacy in the students' relationships. Firstly, I argue that the relationship between family and friends is not suffused. Instead, I consider that it is just a lack of vocabulary to describe the intensity and quality of closeness, in which I refer to 'intimacy', in those relationships. I agree with Allan's (2008) criticism of the concept of suffusion that the language of friendship is drawn on to emphasize the special quality of a given kin tie, while the language of kinship is drawn on to highlight the strength of particular non-kin ties that differentiate them from other relationships. Although the students perceived some of their childhood friends as family members or their family members as best friends, they did not alternately use the term 'family' for non-kin ties or 'friend' for their parents or siblings, when they talk about their relationships. Hence, further discussion of this intriguing matter will come out in the first section of this chapter.

Secondly, I argue that the ways in which the students practise intimacy in new friendships formed in the UK are different from their intimacy practices with family and friends that were already established in Malaysia before they came to the UK to further their study. In this chapter, I explore the ways in which physical distance and sense of belonging change the intimacy practices between the students with their new friends in the UK transforming them from strangers to close friends. Moreover, I found that it is significant to highlight the discussion about the lack of vocabulary in describing new friendships again. I

found that some of the students used the word 'family' to describe Malaysian people in the UK – particularly in the same university, even though they stated that they did not have close relationships with all those people. However, I argue that a new concept of 'familiarity as a family' would better describe the new relationships these students have made. In the second section of this chapter, I describe the intimacy practices in the context of living temporarily abroad that I found significant in my study.

### **FAMILY AND FRIENDS: SUFFUSED RELATIONSHIPS OR JUST A LACK OF VOCABULARY?**

In the construction of intimacy and intimate relationships, individuals establish the emotional and instrumental connection with intimate others with whom they engage in various practices of intimacy. Spencer and Pahl (2006) call these 'intimate others' a *personal community*, in which membership is not rigid, prioritising either blood family members or friends. They argued that intimacy within family and friends is highly suffused as they refer to the deepness and connectedness of intimacy within the personal community instead of the status of the significant others within it. Spencer and Pahl (2006) argued that family and friends are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories especially in discussing intimacy as it is possible to devise networks or overlapping circles which include friends and acquaintances as well as family ties. I found that the ways in which my participants described family and friends became increasingly diverse as they had a variety of understandings of these concepts. Some students perceived their family members as best friends while others referred

to their childhood friends, for example, as part of their family members. While some students believed that friends and family hold specialised roles and functions, others claimed that blood ties do not have any significant impact on their practice of intimacy.

However, is intimacy and its practices limited to a specific group of relationships? From a Malaysian perspective, are roles of family and friends highly specialised? Does intimacy practices conform to common ideas in which family members play a supportive role while friends act as companions and confidants; or is it highly suffused or partially suffused as Spencer and Pahl (2006) found in their study in the UK? My main argument in this section is that some of the students applied the quality of 'best friends' to particular family members and the quality of 'family' to their close friendships – for particular individual or groups of old and new friends. However, I contend that the roles and relationships of family and friends are not suffused. The students use the word 'family' and 'friend' to highlight the strong feeling and bond as there is insufficient vocabulary to describe it otherwise. I will discuss this in more depth throughout this chapter.

The discussion of the students' long-established close friendships in this section is based on the summary in Table 4.1 below. I found that family members, partners, childhood friends, school and college mates were listed as close friends. It is also important to highlight that all of these long-established friends are Malaysian and 67 percent of them reside in Malaysia. 18 percent of them are living abroad temporarily; mostly as students in different cities in the UK and 15 percent of them in other countries, such as Australia, the USA, Singapore,

Switzerland, Ireland, Jordan, Austria, and India. In the first part of this section, I discuss the ideal practices and quality of intimacy in kin ties and non-kin ties in the second part. I draw on the concept of family practice to foreground my discussion.

Table 4.1 Malaysian Students' Long-established Close Friendships

Name	No. of close friends	No. of long-est. friends	Long-established Friends									Current Location		
			Family Members*				Partner*	Childhood Friends*	High School Friends*	College Mates*	Others*	UK	MAS	Others
			Mom	Dad	Siblings	Cousin								
<b>James</b>	12	11	1 (I)	1 (I)	1 (II)	2 (II, III)	-	2 (I)	2 (II, IV)	-	3 (III, IV, V)	-	8	1 IRL 2 USA
<b>Jason</b>	20	14	-	-	-	-	-	1 (I)	10 (I, II, III, IV, VI)	3 (I, IV)	-	3	9	1 AUS 1 USA
<b>Ken</b>	20	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	2 (V)	1 (I)	-	2	-	-
<b>Alvin</b>	20	12	1 (I)	-	1 (I)	-	-	-	2 (I, II)	8 (I, II, IV, V)	-	8	1	2 AUS 1 SIN
<b>Adam</b>	18	16	-	-	-	-	-	5 (I, II)	11 (I, II)	-	-	1	12	2 AUS 1 SWI
<b>Izhan</b>	18	10	1 (I)	1 (I)	5 (I)	1 (IV)	-	-	-	2 (I, III)	-	-	10	-
<b>Alif</b>	17	4	-	-	-	-	-	-	3 (I)	1 (I)	-	2	2	-
<b>Zain</b>	17	10	1 (I)	1 (I)	1 (I)	-	-	3 (II)	3 (I, II)	1 (II)	-	1	9	1 AUT
<b>Saiful</b>	20	11	-	-	-	-	-	-	7 (I)	2 (I)	2 (III, V)	3	8	-
<b>Yana</b>	13	7	1 (I)	1 (I)	2 (I)	-	-	-	2 (III, IV)	1 (IV)	-	1	6	-
<b>Jenny</b>	10	9	-	-	2 (I)	-	-	1 (I)	6 (I, II, III)	-	-	2	6	1 USA
<b>Sweeli</b>	13	11	-	-	-	-	-	-	9 (I, II)	2 (I, II)	-	-	4	7 SIN
<b>Tiffany</b>	12	5	-	-	-	-	-	1 (I)	4 (II, IV)	-	-	3	2	-
<b>Aina</b>	20	18	1 (I)	1 (I)	5 (II)	-	-	-	10 (III)	1 (III)	-	1	16	1 IND
<b>Lily</b>	14	12	1 (I)	1 (I)	1 (III)	-	-	-	4 (IV)	5 (I, II, V)	-	2	9	1 JDN
<b>Nora</b>	9	9	1 (V)	1 (V)	-	1 (III)	1 (I)	-	-	5 (II, III)	-	2	6	1 USA
<b>Fira</b>	15	13	1 (I)	1 (I)	(5) I, II, III	-	-	-	2 (III)	4 (I, II, III)	-	-	8	1 IRL 2 USA
<b>Mila</b>	20	20	1 (I)	1 (I)	1 (I)	-	1 (I)	-	8 (II, V)	8 (II, III, IV, V)	-	3	9	1 AUS 1 USA

Note: \* based on the inner circle of friendship maps (circle I, II, III, IV, V, VI)

IRL (Ireland), USA (United States of America), AUS (Australia), SIN (Singapore), SWI (Switzerland), AUT (Austria), IND (India), JDN (Jordan)

## **Family Practices: The Ideal Practices and Quality of Intimacy**

Although it is generally acknowledged that sometimes there is a conceptual overlap between friends and family, my argument is that the students did not find suitable words to describe the qualities of intimacy in family and friend relationships. Indeed, various views regarding intimacy and its practices are notable in previous studies. One of the significant ones is that intimacy is often associated with family practices, in which families are idealised and viewed as having a set of caring and intimate relationships, as claimed in the previous studies in the west (Gabb 2008; Roseneil and Budgeon 2004). My study supports Morgan's (2011b, p.81) argument that family practices can be either strongly or weakly bounded, where a non-related person may be treated as 'part of the family'. It is important to highlight that the discussion in my study is focusing on 'family practices' and not on the types of families. The concept of 'practices' used by Morgan (2011b) differs from ideals and relates to something more routine or habitual in which social action or 'the way we have always done things' (Morgan 2011b, p.163) create some activities, spaces and times as 'family'.

Nevertheless, the view of intimacy can differ across cultures and may not be universally shared or understood. Societies will have differing perspectives on how intimacy should be displayed within personal relationships and I consider this concept should not be applied universally in an ethnocentric manner. Based on my discussion on religion and friendship practices in the previous chapter, I found that the way in which the students perceived and practised intimacy is

somehow different from the Western model of doing intimacy which Jamieson (2011) also argues should not be seen as the norm everywhere. Accordingly, I found that the findings from the previous studies conducted by Clayton (2014) and Marshall (2008) on Chinese parent-child intimacy in Britain and Canada reflect the cultural differences of intimacy levels and its practices in both Asian and Western culture. Clayton (2014) found that the Western understandings of warmth and care, which incorporate self-disclosure, physical and emotional expressiveness to demonstrate intimacy, may not be applicable to collectivist understandings in Chinese culture. Indeed, in her study, Marshall (2008) argues that filial behaviours, such as being grateful and submissive to parents, which are usually practised in Asian societies, together with gender roles ideology contributed to the lower self-disclosure which impacts on lowering levels of closeness between family members.

However, I argue that it is not entirely right to make a general assumption that all collectivist societies are less intimate and low in affection. Marshall (2008) also claimed that collectivist values in family practices can foster family harmony by lessening family conflict and increasing feelings of mutual obligation. Based on Keshavarz and Baharudin's (2009) study, Malaysian parents from the three ethnic groups are similar to other parents from collectivist societies which practice authoritarian rather than individualist parenting. Nevertheless, they found that the Malaysian parents in their study did not totally reject the Western values of intimacy in family practices. Although intimacy is practised in culturally-specific ways, I argue that it is fluid not fixed. Indeed, globalisation has changed the way in which people practice intimacy. Keshavarz and Baharudin

(2009) found that Malaysian parents emphasise values, such as unity, sharing, and caring for others in their family, although they uphold traditional norms of collectivist values in family practices, such as interdependence, obedience, conformity to the family as well as to the rituals, traditions and religions.

Moreover, based on Table 4.1 above, my findings showed that more than half of the students listed their family members, including their parents, siblings, and cousins, as their close friends and they claimed that they prefer to disclose their personal problems to their family members and trusted them more than non-kin close friends. For that reason, I contend that the 'ideal quality of intimacy' in family practices influenced the way in which the students define their 'close friendships'. As the concept of intimacy is usually represented by ideal qualities of family relationships, such as affection, love and care (Chambers 2013; Morgan 2011b), the students listed a set of close friendships based on these. Thus, it is not surprising that a majority of the students' family members occupied the first two inner circles of the friendship maps. Two quotes below represent most of the students' views of the family as the source of important and close friendships.

YANA: Family is the only concern in my life. They will always be there and I never doubt that they will not be, except being here physically. They give me unconditional love and I know that they will accept my weaknesses and they will not judge me. It is different from friends who are not related by blood. I become a little bit reserved as I am scared that they will judge me if I tell them everything about myself.

AINA: My family are my friends, my really best friends. And they can be both, friends and family. I know I am a little bit emotional, but I believe that friends, without blood relations will leave me someday. But I know that family will stay forever. They give more meaningful support, they understand my feelings, and they share my sadness. Friends only give me general advice, but family's advice is more personal and touches my heart. I more appreciate their advice and support. I know that they will always be there, they cannot run away from me. [Laugh].

Based on my data, I found that acceptance, unconditional love as well as care and support are the essential elements which build up trust and intimacy among family members. Certainly, the saying that 'family will always be there' in both quotes above is a common expectation of the perfect or 'ideal' family practice by most of the students. The students see attachment to family as permanent not temporary. They perceived their family members as best friends, trusted and able to provide a sense of ontological security (Smart et al. 2012) compared to non-kin close friends. Indeed, I argue that the sense of ontological security acquired from family is seen as a 'contract' in which the students expect that family will always be loyal and accept their strength and weaknesses, something which is not expected in non-kin friendships.

It is important to highlight that some students expect that their family members are able to play similar roles as friends, for example as a companion and someone to have fun with. In this case, my finding is similar to Morgan's (2011a) that there is frequently some overlap between the idea of friendship and family. When I asked the students to name their 'close friends', almost all the students

cited their parents and siblings. Although they do make a clear distinction between family and friends, they had slightly different expectations from each relationship. The ideal qualities of family relationships as caring, meaningful and intimate as discussed in previous studies (Gabb 2008; Jamieson, Morgan, Crow and Graham 2006; Muraco 2006), as well as acceptance and loyalty compared to non-kin close friends, lead to high expectations for instrumental and emotional support from family members.

I argue that family relationships turn into friend-like ones and vice versa when people have different expectations regarding the sense of duty or obligation, importance, affection, and continuity of the relationship. This also happens when people take on family-like or friend-like qualities which I describe as the 'ideal qualities of intimacy' in terms of practical help, emotional support, confiding and companionship. In contrast to what Spencer and Pahl's (2006) claimed as the *suffusion of categorization*, I contend that when a particular person gains the 'best friend' or 'family member' qualities in a relationship, it does not mean that their role has changed from family member or friend. Claiming a sister as a best friend is not to deny the family connection but to highlight the strong ties that exist that are more than siblings would typically be expected to have (Allan, 2008). Here, Aina claimed that her sister, Anis, acquired the 'friend-like quality' in their relationship:

AINA: I share a lot of things with my sister, Anis. She also shares a lot of stuff with me. That is why we can become best friends. She is not judgemental because she knows me and she knows my story. We do not contact each other every day. But

if there is anything big happened to me, for instance, I failed my exam or anything bad happened to me; I told my sister first before I told my mother. But if I have happy news to share, my sister will know about that after I have told my mum. We are the only sisters in my family, so she has already faced the similar phase that I am facing right now. She is my teacher. Not totally a teacher because not all her advice is relevant to me [Laugh] but I know that she can understand me better than anyone else.

Based on Aina's quote above, I found that Aina took on friend-like qualities in terms of practical help, emotional support, confiding and companionship, together with the sense of duty or obligation in her sibling relationships with Anis, which turned their sibling relationships into a close friendship. Siblings can be the closest possible soulmates, as in Aina's case, but, this is a very idealistic view of sibling relationships as not all the participants experienced this. A sibling can also be indifferent to each other or even estranged, as in James' case which I will discuss later. As Aina lives away from home, she prefers to share news related to difficulties of studying abroad as well as relationship issues with her sister Anis, especially news that will bother her mother. Aina said that she perceives Anis as a younger version of her mother because Anis is older than her and has already experienced similar situations that she is facing at the moment. Hence, Aina felt that her sister, Anis, was able to understand her more than her parents and brothers.

Although more than a half of the students listed their family members as close friends, based on my findings, I would not be able to make a claim that all family members who were listed as close friends have acquired friend-like qualities in

their relationships. Policarpo (2016) suggests that the reasons why some people are 'special' depends on the time spent together, the trust that has been gained as well as the sharing of routines, special life events, experiences, difficult moments in life and significant life transitions in the life course. In Aina's case, only her sister and mother are referred to as best friends. Aina acquired a friend-like quality along with a close family bond with her sister and mother, but she gained a lower level of intimacy with her father, brothers, and sisters-in-law. Although all of the family members were listed as important and close friends they are not all viewed as having friend-like qualities.

One of the reasons why I claim that the interchangeably use of the words 'friends' and 'family' in describing relationships in my study is just because there is a lack of appropriate vocabulary as students did not use the terms interchangeably every time they talked about specific relationships. For example, Aina still referred to Anis as her 'sister' not as a friend throughout the interviews although Anis is seen as someone special; more than a sister and a best friend. I argue that the reason why Aina, as well as other students, referred to their family members as best friends is because they could not find a suitable word to describe the 'friend-like quality' gained in their relationships. I contend that the roles as a family member and friend are not wholly or partially suffused as claimed by Spencer and Pahl (2006). Indeed, I argue that the attachment, expectations, as well as the way in which students practise intimate acts towards other people, matter in this case. As the eldest sister, Anis cares for and is concerned for Aina's wellbeing since Aina lives alone and away from their family. The role as the eldest sister has not been changed. Instead, the acts of

intimacy, such as sharing personal problems and spending time together portray the close bonds that have been established between Aina and Anis.

As I pointed out earlier, I found that only particular relationships had taken on certain attributes, such as becoming more like a best friend or more like a member of the family. Certainly, I argue that it depends on the level of intimacy as well as the degree of choice and commitment. Based on my findings, I found that the families that already achieved high intimacy levels and close bonds before the students moved abroad had grown closer than before, and vice versa. I found two different cases of intimacy levels in my study, which are James' and Jenny's cases. James and Jenny who have both experienced their parents' divorce listed their families as close friends. However, the ways in which they perceive and practice intimacy in the family are different. Jenny only listed her younger sisters as close friends and indeed perceived them as best friends, while James listed all his family members but claimed that the only reason that family should be perceived as important and intimate is because of a 'normative pressure':

JENNY: I consider my sisters as my best friends because I tell them stuff and everything. Every day when I come back home, I just feel like telling them about my day, teasing each other, sharing some funny things. To a certain extent, I will tell them my problems. But, if it will make them worry, I would not tell them. I do not want them to worry too much and I do not want them to know that I have a lot of things to handle. I still want them to be open to me and stuff like that. It is more like the eldest sister kind of thing. When my parents were divorcing, I

had to be a big person because I did not want to show that I am weak in front of them.

JAMES: I feel like blood ties mean nothing. It is simply the fact that we are related by blood. If blood ties are significant, I might have a close bond with my sister, but actually, I do not meet her every year, and I do not feel anything towards her. [...] I think when I was little I was told that parents are very important. You learn in moral education [one of the syllabi in the Malaysian education system] that parents are important. They work hard to give you a better life, anything that you want. I agree with that, but I don't really know, why I do not really miss them. [...] I love my parents, but I do not call them a lot. I call them once every 4 months.

My data shows that parents' divorce became a turning point as well as causing a shift in caring and power relations in sibling relationships between Jenny and her younger sisters. Jenny did not only take a role as a sister but also as a best friend and a mother especially in making decisions in the family. Jenny gained 'friend-like' qualities with her younger sisters as they are comfortable to talk and to gossip with each other as well as to travel and have fun together. Besides claiming her sisters as best friends, Jenny carried out her role and responsibility as the eldest sister and became more responsible towards her younger sisters as she wanted to make sure that they are not affected by their parents' divorce. In this case, Jenny's situation has resonance with Mauthner's (2005) findings that women's experiences of sistering evolve and change under the influences of life events outside of the sister relationships, her parents' divorce in this case. However, even though Jenny gives more instrumental and emotional support to her sisters, the relationships are not reciprocal according to Jenny.

On the other hand, James who also experienced his parents' divorce argued that the only reasons that he listed his family members as close friends was a sense of obligation as well as the normative pressure that 'family should be important'. James had not had a close relationship with his family since he had been studying abroad – since high school – and that recently his parents had divorced. He is also detached from his family due to his sister's problem of drug abuse as well as his own mental illness. During the interview, James stated that he had more frequent contacts with his childhood friends compared to his family members to the extent that he did not remember when was the last time he contacted his family members. Nevertheless, James listed all his family members including his cousins as close friends, even though their relationships were not as intimate as his relationships with childhood friends.

Although James feels some unease about his family relationships, I argue that intimacy become an impossible 'ideal', not only to James but also to other students. The ideal qualities of intimacy in family practices and the sense of obligations might be influenced by the Malaysian collectivist culture which would oblige students to include their family members as close friends. Although James did not feel close to nor had acquired friend-like qualities with his parents and younger sister, he listed them as close friends in order to conform to the social norms. Throughout the interview, I noticed that James never talked about intimate practices and intimate experiences with his family members, which I found contrary to his inclusion of family members as close friends. James talked about instrumental support, particularly financial, that he had gained from his parents, but he did not receive adequate emotional support from his family

members. James repeatedly argued that he included his parents and sister as close friends in this study just because he learned that 'family should be close and important'. However, the way he talked about his relationship with his childhood friends, Halim and family seem to show that James sought intimacy and the ideals of the family from non-kin ties, which I will discuss further in the next part of this section.

Based on both cases, lack of quality time that family members spend together as well as less affectionate communication can become key factors of unaccomplished friend-like qualities (Pahl and Spencer 2010), as seen in James' and Jenny's family relationships. In general, the roles as family members have not been changed or suffused, but the relationships became closer and special due to the choices, commitment as well as the high levels of intimacy gained within the relationships. Although intimacy is often seen in common sense terms as a natural process, my data show that it is also learned and practised. The evidence presented in this section suggests that only specific family members are seen as 'special' and best friend-like for some of the students as they practised the ideal qualities of intimacy in their relationships. Indeed, these arguments are applicable in the non-kin close friendships which I will discuss later.

In addition, I argue that the students have different expectations and obligations in friendship and family relationships and cultural and religious background are substantial elements that affect the way in which Malaysian students experience and define intimacy. I found that the roles of family and friends are specialised.

Thus, the students interact with them and practise intimacy in several different ways. There were no findings in my study that showed that the students had fun and did ‘friendship activities’, especially with parents. Most of the intimate acts perceived by the students as ‘friend-like qualities’ – loving, caring and sharing, with their selected family members, actually happened within family practices or ‘doing’ family as described by Morgan (2011a). Nevertheless, this raises a question whether intimacy in non-kin close friendships is similar to ‘family practices’ or different to that? This will be discussed in the next section.

### **Families of Choice: “They are part of my family”**

Previously, I have argued that the reason students called some of their family members ‘best friends’ is due to the lack of vocabulary to describe the high intimacy levels and practices within their relationships. I will now turn to discuss this in relation to ‘family-like’ relationships between the students and their close friends, particularly childhood and high school friends. Consistent with Policarpo (2016, p.29), I have argued that time and the length of friendship seem to be seen as a ‘catalyser of intimacy’. Based on Table 4.1 above, one-third of the students listed their childhood friends – known to them since they were three to five years old, and almost all students listed their high school friends as close friends. Similar to family members, I found that the students grew closer to a particular individual or group of childhood and high school friends as they were growing up and sharing specific life events and challenging moments in life together.

In order to discuss these questions in relation to family practices raised earlier, I choose three notable cases – Jenny’s, James’ and Zain’s. They are three out of six students who listed their childhood friends as close friends. Indeed, those friends are not only seen as best friends but also as part of their family. As I described previously, James and Jenny did not establish intimate family relationships, especially with their parents, unlike most of the students. However, they gained a different kind of support from various friends, especially long-established friends, and achieved close relationships with them. As they gained less emotional support from family members, Jenny and James have developed ‘family-like’ relationships with some of their long-established close friends. In these cases, some of Jenny’s and James’ non-kin close friends are perceived ‘like a family’, as they acquired family-like qualities in their relationships. Some of Jenny’s high school friends and James’ childhood friends became the alternative for affectionate communication and self-disclosure which were limited in their family relationships. I found that friendship ties became increasingly important after the students’ family breakdown as Jenny and James sought intimacy and the ideals of the family which were not gained in their own family relationships.

JENNY: Luckily, my high school friends, which I listed here, they were very supportive. One of them already experienced his parents’ divorce, and he advised me that everything is going to be all right. My high school friends make me feel better. I know that they cannot do anything, but they were always there for me to listen and to lend me their shoulders to cry on. I was very irrational and emotional; sometimes I did not want to listen

to their advice. But I know that it could be worse if they were not there to support me. They help me to be strong so that I can also help my sisters to cope with the divorce.

JAMES: I have known Halim since I was 6 years old. He is my neighbour, and our family is very close to each other. His home is my second home, we eat together in his house, and I went on vacation together with his family. Even our mothers called us their second sons. We grew up together, so we know each other very well compared to other friends who know each other for two to three years. I know what he likes or dislikes, I know what he thinks, and I know whether he is right or not, whether he lies or hides anything from me. Besides my family, Halim knows about my illness. There is no secret that he can hide from me and I have never doubted him. I know him for ages, so I know him very well, and I know his characters.

Based on both quotes above, it is significant to highlight that Jenny and James not only listed their childhood and high school friends as close friends but also like a part of their family, specifically as siblings. Moreover, they received not only emotional support but also instrumental support from these long-established close friends. I argue that time and the length of friendship are significant in producing intimacy as those who have known each other for many years – since childhood, adolescence, or another important stage of the life course, gained already enough time to share important events, experiences and transitions in life (Bilecen 2014; Policarpo 2016). I found that the students have developed trust and reciprocity as well as family-like qualities of care and love, although, in the current situation, they were separated by distance.

Moreover, it is important to highlight that Jenny disclosed her struggle as the eldest sister and gained advice from her friends who share the similar situation of parents' divorce. While James who is the only son in his family, established not only a sibling relationship with his childhood friend, Halim but he has also developed a close relationship with Halim's family. As I have argued previously, the way in which Malaysian students practise intimacy in family relationships is influenced by emotional life events or emotional episodes (Törrönen and Maunu, 2011), such as family breakdown in Jenny's and James' cases. They sought intimacy in the form of close friendships as a result of weakly bonded family relationships. I argue that this situation makes friendship become more significance in Jenny's and James' lives.

Like James, who developed family-like values from his childhood friendships, Zain claims his childhood friends as his own brothers. Zain has close relationships with his family members as well as his childhood friends who have lived in the same neighbourhood since he was 3 years old. They know each other's family members really well, and they have kept these intimate relationships until now although, currently, Zain is studying abroad. He was really close to his childhood friends to the extent that they could eat together with each other's family members and stay the night at each other's house. Zain talked about one of the recent emotional situations that has made him value his friendship with childhood friends, which is when he was faced with financial issues in the UK. Although they were separated by distance, Zain received financial support from his childhood friends as the availability of online banking enable them to transfer money to him instantaneously across distance.

ZAIN: I have known Hadi, Isma, and Johan since I was 3 years old. They are my neighbours, and I still contacted them almost every day. For me, best friends are friends whom I know for a very long time, and we keep updated on each other's lives and meet each other. I told them about things that happen here in the UK even though they were in Malaysia. I told them when I had financial problems. They helped me banking the money without telling my parents. I could tell them my problems, and I could be myself because we already knew each other for a long time and we are really close. They are like my own family. When they came to my house, they actually make their selves at home [Laugh]. They asked my mother what did she cook for today and then we had our lunch together.

In this case, Zain was very open in talking about his financial issues as well as other personal problems to his childhood friends back home compared to his friends in the UK, although some of his friends in the UK were known to him since college two years before. It seems to be that it is familial obligation to provide material and financial support (Beech 2014; Liu 2016) which make it challenging for people to reveal financial problems and get the material support from friendship ties. Nevertheless, family-like relationships that were already established in Zain's childhood friendships make him more open to talking about sensitive matters including financial problems. Even though financial aid is rarely received from a friend, as other students preferred to engage in financial practices with their family members or partners because they considered these relationships to be intimate, I argue that this type of instrumental support and reciprocity in Zain's case give valuable meaning to close and trusted friendships.

Although Zain claimed that he did not prefer to share his emotional problems with family members and close friends as I have discussed in the previous chapter, I found that Zain, as well as other male students, did share their personal problems with close friends, although limited. Similar to Bilecen (2014), I agree that trust and reciprocity were essential not only to develop and sustain the close friendships but also in financial support practices. Although the students generally rely on scholarships and rarely engage in financial assistance with friends, I found that there was a perception of support and security that friends would be there for them if needed.

Certainly, childhood and high school friends are not only perceived as family members but also as the most important and close friends by most of the students. Similar to Spencer and Pahl (2006, p.53), I indicate that the length of time knowing each other are significant factors for the maintenance of long-established close friendships especially in the situation of living abroad. However, I contend that the relationships between James and Halim, Jenny and her high school friends, as well as Zain and his childhood friends, are not suffused because they still played specialised roles as companions and not as family members. Indeed, I found that Jenny, James and Zain started to realise that their relationships with those friends grew closer after a specific situation happened – parents' divorce, mental illness and financial difficulties. These emotional life events and shared experiences have developed the ideal family qualities in their relationships and changed the ways in which students define and practise intimacy with those specific friends, but not their roles as close friends.

This raises a question of whether intimacy practices in friendship are similar to or beyond family practices. It seems that it is a general cultural norm that family is supposed to be permanent and people are always in a family. However, can close friendships be considered permanent if they acquire the quality of intimacy similar to the family? Based on these questions, my study highlights that the ideals of the family found in non-kin close friendships reminds the student of being in a family and they start acting like one. Based on three cases discussed above, childhood and high school friends acquired a 'special' bond that friends would not be typically be expected to have. I argue that a high level of intimacy is commonly associated with the ideal family practices and individuals who achieve 'family-like qualities' in relationships, whether family members or non-kin, are perceived as important and close friends for Malaysian students in my study. As I have argued earlier, intimacy as a concept should not be applied universally in an ethnocentric manner. Thus, I contend that intimacy from the Malaysian students' point of view is somehow influenced by the quality of intimacy in family relationships. All acts of intimacy in the family have been seen as ideal practices, and whoever acquires those qualities and practises those values are perceived as 'family' and 'intimate others'.

Nevertheless, no matter how close the relationships that the students have with their 'close friends' who were listed in this study, it is not entirely right to mix up the family and friends relationships in this context. Similar to Bowlby (2011), I argue that it is more significant to explore how shifting conceptions of friendship influence the practices of care and support, rather than simply focus on the 'families of choice' versus 'families of fate' argument (Pahl and Spencer 2004).

In this context, the ideals of the family found in non-kin friendships have changed the way in which Malaysian students practise intimacy. It is important to recognise that in the use of friend-like and family-like concepts, the students did not believe that their friends were family – there was no change of status, but they fulfilled some of the same functions as a family. They are applying Malaysian principles of what a family is, to friendship in which a particular kind of close friendship develops. This is then influenced by distance and length of time they have known each other. Although almost all students perceived their family members and some of their long-established friends as close friends, not all of them achieved high levels of intimacy. Thus, closeness of relationships, which include family members and friends, depends on a high level of intimacy and its practices within the relationships. The relationships are not suffused, but the students used the words ‘friend-like’ and ‘family-like’; which I refer to as the ‘ideal qualities of intimacy’, because there are no suitable words to describe those intimacy levels acquired from specific individuals and why certain relationships seem to be seen as more ‘special’ than other relationships. I suggest a concept of ‘familiarity as a family’ to describe the ideals of family of intimacy in non-kin close friendships which I will discuss further in the next section.

## **'FAMILIARITY AS A FAMILY' IN NEW FRIENDSHIPS**

Studying abroad represents a phase of life when a student who has chosen to earn a degree in another country needs to adapt to a new environment and to choose whether they want to maintain their long-established friendships or to develop new close friendships abroad. It is interesting to find that new friends formed abroad – when the students in my study are studying in the UK, are listed as close friends although the friendships are still new. This intrigues me to explore on how students' mobilities abroad transformed new friendships into close ties within a short period. However, it seems that the new close friends are not being valued as meaningful and intimate as their families and long-established close friends, although almost all the students listed at least one new friend abroad as a close friend. When I took into consideration that these students may have a need for GC close friends, it raises a question of whether new friends abroad are equally important as family and long-established friends. I illustrate the Malaysian students' new close friendship in Table 4.2 below.

Table 4.2 Malaysian Students' New Close Friendships

Name	Ethnicity	No. of close friends	No. of new friends	New Friends		Malaysian			Other Nationalities		
				Same university*	Different university*	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Asian	British	Others
<b>James</b>	Siamese-Chinese	12	1	1 (I)	-	-	-	-	-	-	1 (RUS)
<b>Jason</b>	Indian	20	6	4 (II, IV, VI)	2 (III, IV)	-	2	2	2 (SIN)	-	-
<b>Ken</b>	Chinese	20	17	17 (I, II)	-	5	11	-	-	-	1 (CYP)
<b>Alvin</b>	Chinese	20	8	8 (I, II, III, IV, V)	-	1	-	1	4 (HKG), 1 (SIN) 1 (CHN)	-	-
<b>Adam</b>	Malay	18	2	2 (I, II)	-	-	-	-	1 (SIN), 1 (CHN)	-	-
<b>Izhan</b>	Malay	18	8	8 (II, III, IV)	-	8	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Alif</b>	Malay	17	13	11 (I, II, III)	2 (II)	12	-	-	-	1 (Gujarat)	-
<b>Zain</b>	Malay	17	7	7 (I, II, III)	-	7	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Saiful</b>	Malay	20	9	9 (I, II, III, V)	-	8	-	-	1 (HKG)	-	-
<b>Yana</b>	Indian	13	6	6 (II, III) **	-	-	2	-	1 (IND) 1 (HKG)	2	-
<b>Jenny</b>	Chinese	10	1	1 (I)**	-	-	1	-	-	-	-
<b>Sweeli</b>	Chinese	13	2	2 (I)**	-	-	-	-	1 (HKG)	-	1 (ITA)
<b>Tiffany</b>	Chinese	12	7	7 (II, III, IV, V)	-	-	2	1	1 (CHN) 1 (IND)	1 (Chinese)	1 (NGA)
<b>Aina</b>	Malay	20	2	2 (IV)	-	1	1	-	-	-	-
<b>Lily</b>	Malay	14	2	2 (II, III)	-	2	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Nora</b>	Malay	9	0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Fira</b>	Malay	15	2	2 (III)	-	2	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Mila</b>	Malay	20	0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Note: \* based on the inner circle of friendship maps (circle I, II, III, IV, V, VI)

\*\* one of the new friends is a partner

SIN (Singapore), HKG (Hong Kong), CHN (China), IND (India), VNM (Vietnam), RUS (Russia), ITA (Italy), NGA (Nigeria), CYP (Cyprus)

I argue that the ways in which Malaysian students define and practise intimacy in new close friendships are different from the way they define and practise intimacy with families and long-established close friendships. Based on Table 4.2 above, 74 percent of new close friendships are co-national friends in the UK, while the other 18 percent are mostly Asian students, followed by British and other international students, 4 percent respectively. These results are consistent with those of other recent studies (Coleman 2015; Geeraert et al. 2014; Glass et al. 2014; Lim and Pham 2016; Rienties and Nolan 2014) which suggested that the international students socialise more with co-national friends. Therefore, it is significant to focus on the co-national new close friendships in this section. The question raised here is whether being away from home has made this particular time of friendships become somehow different and special.

Previously, I suggested the reason why the students were close to their family members and long-established close friends was because they grew up and shared emotionally significant life events together. These findings suggested that the length of friendship is important in producing as well as maintaining intimacy. However, I found that it was possible for students to form new close friendships during a temporary period of living abroad. Hence, I argue that living abroad is one of the significant life events similar to other specific and emotional life events that happened to the students, such as parents' divorce and financial difficulties, as I have discussed in the previous section. Although I found that the Malaysian students' new close friendships are not as intimate as family and long-established close friendships, I contend that they are meaningful and intimate in different ways. As all the students are not yet married and came alone to the UK without family members, they tend to have feelings of being

'like a family' with other Malaysian students in the UK, which is one of the significant findings in my study.

Nevertheless, does the idea of being 'like a family' in this context support my previous argument on the instilled idea of love, caring and sharing in family practices; which were also found in a particular group of childhood and high school friends? In the previous section, I argue that there was a lack of vocabulary to describe the high intimacy levels in the family and long-established close friendships. However, in this section, I argue that the use of terms 'friends' and 'family' to refer to new close friendships is different from the friend-like and family-like concepts. I found that the students use of the term 'family' focuses on the sense of 'familiarity' rather than family practices as discussed earlier in this chapter. Thus, as previously mentioned, I introduced the term 'familiarity as a family' to describe students' close friendships when they are far from home. Certainly, I found two key factors that influenced the practices of intimacy between the students and new close friends formed in the UK: a sense of belonging and homophily, and shared physical space and activities, which will foreground my discussion in the next section.

### **A Sense of Belonging and Homophily: Birds of a Feather Flock Together**

Based on my discussion in the previous section, it is not surprising that in all 18 cases of my study the long-established close friendships are with Malaysians and were established in Malaysia. I also found that 74 percent of new relationships formed in the UK are with Malaysians. These findings showed that sharing similar nationality is one of the significant factors in creating intimacy in

friendships. Accordingly, I found that previous studies (see Bilecen 2014; Brown 2009a) also noted the importance of new friendships for international students and these studies indicated that co-national friendship networks could be developed very quickly prior to arrival of the students in the host countries. My finding is also in agreement with Beech's (2014) that the students were actively searching for new contacts who could offer them advice and support related to studying abroad before they arrived in the country. It is also interesting to note that some students formed new friendships before they arrived in the UK through friends of friends. Here, Jenny talked about the only new close friend that she had in the UK. She got to know Lee who was initially a friend, and then a boyfriend, through her long-established close friends in Malaysia.

JENNY: I met my boyfriend, Lee, in Manchester last year. He is a third-year student and my senior in accounting and finance. Actually, he is my friend of a friend. I never met him in Malaysia but one of my close friends in the list [friendship map], knew him since in Malaysia. He helped me and my friend to settle down, and we become friends since then, and we got together this year.

Although Jenny and Lee had never met each other in Malaysia, Lee was really helpful to provide the information and support especially in arranging accommodation and helping Jenny to settle down, as discussed in the previous chapter. Accordingly, I indicate that co-national friends abroad seem to be important in providing instrumental support about practical aspects of living and studying in the UK. My findings are consistent with those of Lim and Pham (2016) who claimed that the readiness to give support to the newly arrived students during their initial difficult phase of adaptation cemented the feelings of

friendship and good-will among co-nationals. As Jenny came alone to further her study and came to the UK for the first time, the support received from Lee during initial arrival and settling in period in the UK was meaningful. Thus, it has developed high levels of intimacy in their friendship.

Indeed, the early adaptation stage of living abroad is an important time for the Malaysian students to strengthen the bond with their new friends. Some students developed new friendships when they participated in the Malaysian students' pre-departure programme in Malaysia. Here, Saiful talked about his experience in taking part. He formed a new friendship with his senior, Johan, through a program that was conducted for Muslim students in Malaysia who will pursue their study specifically in the UK and Ireland.

SAIFUL: Johan is my senior in Manchester. I got to know him in a pre-departure programme, Journey of a Muslim (JOM), for Malaysian students. The program is conducted by one of the Malaysian societies in the UK, and I joined the program before I came to the UK. Johan was one of the facilitators for that JOM program. We became quite close after that. We took the same course and he is also my *naqib* [leader] for our *usrah* [Islamic sharing sessions] in the university.

Similar to Jenny, Saiful and most of the students came to the UK for the first time and they did not have any experiences of living abroad. Saiful talked about the support and advice that he gets from Johan to adapt to student life in the UK. They grew closer as they took a similar course and shared a similar interest in Islamic activities. According to Maundeni (2001) students' connection to religious groups also facilitates their adjustment abroad. Sharing similarity or

status homophily in terms of social identity – nationality, ethnicity and religion, in Jenny’s and Saiful’s cases, helps to transform the weak ties into strong ties within a short period. Besides that, sharing similar space and activities is significant in producing close friendships among the Malaysian students abroad, and I will discuss this next.

However, I found that status homophily also became a barrier to intercultural contact which resulted in fewer close friendships between the Malaysian students and the host students as well as other international students. My study, as well as other recent research (Dunne 2013; Beech 2016), found that the reality of living and studying in the UK could have very different results than the belief that studying overseas will help the students to engage with the British student community. I found that the concept of ‘cultural cliques’ used by Beech (2016) represents the formation of Malaysian students’ co-national close friendships. The formation of ‘cultural cliques’ is because the students felt that it was easier to interact with people from their home country or to those from a similar cultural background who would be able to understand better the emotions experienced and the struggle faced from leaving home. Here, Ken and Tiffany shared their feelings about their new Malaysian friendships formed abroad.

KEN: I think my Malaysian friends here make me feel the hometown feeling. It is hard to mingle with other people, although they came from Chinese backgrounds like the students from China, Hong Kong and Singapore. Although the appearance is almost the same, our mindset and the ways of thinking are different. The Malaysian population here is quite big and active. Malaysian student’s society is quite active, and

every time they organise an event, I can meet a lot of Indian, Malays and Chinese and I can make a lot of new friends.

TIFFANY: Even though we did not really keep in touch, but as long as I know that you are a Malaysian, you are considered as my friend. I try to be close to other Malaysian students because I am a Malaysian and I have a mindset that we are in a foreign country, so we need to help each other.

Based on both quotes above, I indicate that national and cultural bonds are important in recreating 'family' and 'home' abroad. Familiarity makes sense of family-type connections between new friends and this familiarity provides ontological security by making a new context feel more secure or homely. Similar to Brown (2009a), I found that interacting with co-nationals too, frequently led the students to sometimes feel that they had not left their home countries at all. The feeling of oneness generated by shared national culture has created a sense of intimacy between the Malaysian students and their co-national friends abroad. Indeed, I found that the students considered all Malaysians that they know as 'friends' and the Malaysian community as a 'family'. It is interesting to highlight how students' mobility has transformed the way in which they perceive intimacy and close friendship. I found that mobility to the UK has transformed the co-national students from strangers into friends and surprisingly into close friends in a short period. The sense of belonging and connectedness as well understanding the struggle of living alone in the UK are the reasons why the students believe that they need to help each other. I argue that co-national friends create a sense of belonging or fitting in as they share common beliefs, values and social norms which can help them to cope with their diverse setting.

Moreover, I found that different ethnic groups, as well as religious beliefs, did not restrain the feeling of oneness in the co-national friendships. Accordingly, I argue that Malaysian interethnic close friendships are notable in my study. Although recent students' mobility studies (see Bilecen 2014; Brown 2009a; Gu and Maley 2008) discussed the relationship between international students and co-national as well as transnational friendships, they omitted to discuss further these aspects from a multi-ethnic and religious perspective. As Malaysia is a multicultural country where the people come from different ethnicities and practise a different religion, the debate about interethnic friendships has gained fresh prominence with many showing that Malaysian students abroad (see Ahmad et al. 2014) reported having close ties with people from similar ethnicity and religion.

On the contrary, my study showed that one-third of the Malaysian students had listed new co-national friends abroad from a different ethnicity and religion as close friends. Here, Aina who only listed two new friends formed abroad as close friends claimed that sharing a house and common interest has helped her develop closer ties with her new Malaysian Chinese friend, Zaza. She listed Zaza as a new close friend as they shared the same house and course of study. They share a similar interest in movies and food, and they always talk about work placement in the hospital as well as the upcoming exams as they are both studying medicine. However, as a Malay and a Muslim, Aina talked about the difficulties that she needs to face due to a different culture and religious beliefs.

AINA: Our religions are different, and sometimes I found it is hard to explain about our culture and I am afraid that the topic is too sensitive to talk about. Our friendship is still new, so I still

carefully choose the topic to talk with her. We do not have any problems especially related to food because Zaza does not really like to eat pork and she rarely cooks in our house. I do not mind if Zaza bought and ate pork in our house because she will wrap it and used the different compartment in the fridge to store it. I am okay with that as long as I did not touch it.

Although living with a Muslim flatmate guaranteed the avoidance of non-halal meat as Muslims friends offered the reassurance of shared values and practices, Aina argued that she never sees the culture and religious difference as a barrier in her friendship with Zaza as they both respect each other's beliefs. In Aina's case, intimacy was created through the act of respect and acceptance of different cultural and religious beliefs. I found that Aina's claim is different from Brown's (2009b) findings which stated that feeling understood brought a sense of ease that would not be found with a non-Muslim friend. Indeed, living together as housemates has strengthened the friendships between Aina and Zaza. Moreover, some of the Malaysian students claimed that living together as housemates or flatmates makes them feel like a 'family'. It is important to highlight that the concept of 'family', in this context, is different from 'family-like' relationships as discussed in the previous section, but it is more related to the notion of 'familiarity as a family'. In this regard, I found that sharing similar physical space as well as participating in physical activities has developed the idea of 'family' in new close friendships which I will discuss next.

### **Shared Physical Space and Activities**

Previously, I argued that homophily in terms of social background and identity – nationality, ethnicity and religion to be specific, influenced the way in which

Malaysian students define close friendships and intimacy. In this section, I argue that sharing similar social space, such as housing, academic course and personal interests, as well as physical activities and social events, seem to be significant in the development of new close friendships. Similar to Gomes et al. (2014), I found that new co-national friends, either in the UK or elsewhere provide academic, material and emotional support. It is important to highlight that the different time zone and physical space limits the students from asking for practical help from friends at-a-distance and new close friends can give immediate response and support. Indeed, similar to Brown's (2009a) finding, I found that access to practical help in everyday life is the main reason for the formation of co-national close friendships or 'cultural cliques' (Beech 2016). These non-kin ties are treated as 'part of the family' due to weakly bounded family practices which are notable in the situation of living abroad (Morgan 2011b).

I argue that sharing similar physical and social space, is significant in creating intimate relationships between Malaysian students and new friends formed abroad. People are more likely to have contact with those who are closer to them in geographic location rather than those who are distant (Mcpherson et al. 2001). Although sharing the same nationality reaffirms the sense of belonging, which is significant in emotional connectedness, I argue that sharing physical and social spaces became the key reasons for the production of intimacy in new friendships. I found that most of the new close friends went to the same university and some of them shared the same accommodation, tutorials and lectures. Sharing accommodation with other co-national students resulted in close friendships. Here, Tiffany and Ken talked about their experiences of living

together with other Malaysian students and they described how they feel like a 'family' as the result.

TIFFANY: You feel quite warm when you meet Malaysian people because, at my university, the Malaysian population is small compared to other universities. Some of them even stay in the same flat as mine. So, the time that we meet with one another is quite a lot. I feel like we are a family because we live under the same roof for almost three years. I think that we became closer because we cook and eat together, and spend time together in our flat.

KEN: The hall that I live is practically a Malaysian flat. I always cook together with my Malaysian friends and sometimes they bring board games and cards to play together. I think it is pretty much fun, although it is very childish for my age. I have a good time with them, and we laugh a lot when we spend our time together.

Sharing similar space, doing daily routines as well as spending time together has strengthened the friendships between the students and co-national new friends. The students perceived co-national friends, especially their housemates/flatmates as a 'family' as they practice the 'love, care and share' qualities in their friendships which are associated with family. Sharing accommodation creates the sense of 'familiarity as a family' among students. Indeed, the ideals intimacy qualities of family and friends remind the students of being in a family and consequently, they start acting like a family. This is similar to Morgan's (2011b) argument that these family practices create some activities, spaces and times as 'family'. Although their friendships were still new and admittedly not as intimate as family and long-established friends, sharing a

similar physical and social space triggered more social interactions and participation which are vital in the development of close friendships. Indeed, sharing similar physical and social space has changed the way in which Malaysian students define and practise intimacy.

Similar to my discussion earlier in this chapter, the students did not find a suitable word to describe their relationships with their housemates/flatmates. I argue that they use the word 'family' because they practice the similar routines, such as cooking and playing games together just like a family. For that reason, I found that physical contact, immediacy and co-presence are essential in sustaining as well as producing intimacy in friendships. Physical proximity and touch often indicate and complement other demonstrations of intimacy, including other ways of showing and giving care (Jamieson 2013). Emotional intimacy is expressed with physical intimacy, such as hugs of affection or more fleeting touches of comfort at emotionally charged occasions. Lily who experienced her uncle's death when she was studying in the UK found that distance, as well as different physical space and time zone led to the limitation of a sense of presence and the immediate need for physical contact and proximity.

LILY: When my dad called and told me that my uncle passed away, I am shocked and feel really sad. It was midnight in Malaysia, and I know that my best friend, Aiesyah, is still sleeping. I wanted to tell someone about this; I need someone that physically here with me. So, I went to my housemate's room and told her about it. I cried and hugged her. She calmed me down and asked me to recite the Quran and pray for my

uncle. Although I still feel sad, her presence and advice make me feel better.

I stopped the interview to calm her down as Lily was crying really hard at that time. Although we had just met, as a fellow Malaysian student far from home, I could feel her sadness of not being able to go back home due to distance and cost, and I understood her longing for immediate physical touch and hugs to channel her emotions. As shown in Lily's case above, I understand the reason why these new friendships grew closer due to geographical distance. Sharing similar physical space and time zone enables the students to spend more time and do more activities together with their new friends in the UK as compared to family members and long-established close friends in Malaysia and other countries. Similar to Weiner and Hannum (2012), I found that due to the inability to convey social support over distance, family members and long-established friends in Malaysia cannot be as directly supportive as new friends in the UK. GC close friends could provide more social and instrumental support than LD close friends. Thus, I found that LD close friends were being asked for less support than GC close friends because the students already acquired spatial sensibilities and mutual understanding in LD close friendships.

Besides sharing accommodation, universities' Malaysian societies events are also opportunities for the students to socialise and form new close friendships. The students talked about how these societies help the new students to adjust to their lives in the UK as well as connect to all Malaysians through various cultural events and festivals. Izhan, the president of the Malaysian society in his university, claimed that Malaysian students are supportive and involved in most of the Malaysian societies' events. Indeed, when I did the interview, Izhan was

busy organising a Deepavali celebration for Malaysian students in his university, and I found that a lot of Malaysian, as well as British and other international students, participated in that event.

IZHAN: Malaysian students here are really supportive. When we want to organise an event, other Malaysian societies, like UMNO Club are willing to help us and work together to make our event a huge success. I think it is maybe because our Malaysian community here is small compared to other universities. That is what makes us feel like home and strengthens our relationships as a Malaysian.

As previously mentioned, the students considered all Malaysians that they know, as friends because the Malaysian community is small in some universities. Most of the students talked about their participation in most of the cultural events organized by the Malaysian society in their university and made new friends through those events. Besides that, most of those who received scholarships from the Malaysian government or companies took Accounting and Finance. I found that the students prefer to share their difficulties in academic studies with co-national friends. Here, Alif talked about the ways that he deals with his study problems.

ALIF: If I have a problem with my study and struggle with the test and coursework, I will refer to Mira, Lina and Diana. We are Malaysian and we took the same course. So, they know about my problems and they know how to give a response to it. I listed them as close friends because they are important to me in terms of study. But, we are not really close to the extent that I can share all of my other personal problems with them.

In this case, Alif grew closer to Mira, Lina and Diana – the only female friends listed as close friends, after he shared his problems with them. Similar to Lim and Pham (2016), I found that the students tend to socialise primarily with co-national friends unless they are forced to work together with other students on projects or when there were no other co-nationals in the same class or student accommodation. In this case, the students claimed that they had developed a few new friendships with British and other international students, but the friendships are not as close as with Malaysian friends. Based on my findings, only ten students out of 18 listed other nationalities of students as close friends and none of them were placed in the first inner circle of the friendship maps.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on the discussion in this chapter, I draw the conclusion that most of the Malaysian students' close friendships are transnational friends first established in Malaysia, and co-national friends formed abroad. However, the ways in which the students define and practice intimacy in both types of close friendships are different. The students developed close friendships with some family members and a particular group of long-established friends as they were growing up and shared significant life events together. Some of the family members have acquired 'friend-like' qualities, and some of the childhood and high school friendships have developed 'family-like' qualities. However, some of the new close friends, specifically co-national friends in the UK, are perceived as 'family' although some of them have not yet acquired 'family-like' qualities in their relationships. Due to the situation of living abroad, the students acquired the aforementioned 'familiarity as a family' relationship – a new concept that I

introduce in my study to explain this complicated relationship, with co-national friends in the Malaysian community in the UK. Consequently, the students refer to family members as 'best friends', old close friends in Malaysia as 'siblings' and co-national close friends abroad as 'family'.

My argument in this chapter is that the reference to the family as friends and friends as a family is not because the relationships are suffused in terms of roles, but it is due to a lack of vocabulary for the students to describe their relationships with such high intimacy levels. The students refer to a friend as 'like a family' and a sister as 'best friend' because they gained the ideal qualities of intimacy in their relationships. The use of friendship language in a family relationship does not portray that the roles of family members have been changed or suffused. Instead, the relationships with specific family members are seen as 'special', and more like a relationship with a best friend as a result of the high levels of intimacy gained within the relationships. In my study, not all family members acquired a 'best friend' value. Therefore, the use of term 'best friend' in family relationships is not to deny the family connection but to emphasize the stronger ties than family members would typically be expected to have.

However, the terms are not being used interchangeably when the students talked about specific relationships. Family and friends are deemed as two separate personal relationships, but some of the members have gained the 'best friend' or 'family' qualities in the relationships. Individuals who gained these qualities of intimacy are perceived as close and important friends. Nevertheless, the use of such terms is not to deny family or friendship ties. The

status as a friend is not changed, but some of the long-established close friends – especially childhood and high school friends as discussed in this chapter, have fulfilled some of the same functions of care and support as family and vice versa. The ideals of the family found in non-kin close friendships remind people of being in a family and they start to act like a family in their friendships. In the Malaysian context, I argue that intimacy is somehow influenced by the quality of intimacy in family relationships, culture and religious beliefs.

Moreover, 'familiarity as a family' as a concept shows how Malaysian students perceived intimacy in their new close friendships formed abroad and act upon it based on their notions of the ideal family. I argue that the roles of family and friends are not suffused, but the sense of familiarity of being in a family and family practices brought the qualities of the family into close friendships. In the context of living temporarily abroad, some new friends are perceived as family members as they share more similarity or homophily in terms of nationality, physical space and activities. Familiarity makes sense of family connection between new friends and this familiarity provides ontological security which makes the students feel more secure – as if they are still living in Malaysia. For that reason, it is not surprising that the Malaysian community in the UK is perceived as a 'Malaysian family' as claimed by all participants in my study. As the sense of 'home' and familiarity, as well as physical contact, has developed and strengthened new close friendships formed abroad, I will discuss on how these levels of intimacy have been achieved through the practices of intimacy in face-to-face and online interactions in the next chapter to gain a deeper understanding of this argument.

## CHAPTER FIVE DISTANCE IS A NEW CLOSENESS

Previously, I highlighted three types of close friendships: family members, old friends established in Malaysia and new friends formed abroad and the practices of intimacy. I observed how Malaysian students take on family-like or friend-like qualities which I described as the 'ideal qualities of intimacy' in terms of practical help, emotional support, confiding and companionship. I introduced a new concept of 'familiarity as a family' to describe family-like close friendships and the ideals of family intimacy in non-kin close friendships when students are far from home. Therefore, to understand the practices of the 'ideal qualities of intimacy' as well as 'familiarity as a family', my discussion in this chapter is based on the mediated interaction in close friendships in the context of living abroad focusing on both LD and GC close friendships.

As I have mentioned previously, although 18 percent of Malaysian students' long-established close friends in Malaysia are now studying in the UK, only one person, Nora's boyfriend, lives in the same city and studies in the same university. On the other hand, almost all (95 percent) of Malaysian students' new friends live in the same city and go to the same university as the students. Hence, in this chapter, I refer to long-established close friends as 'LD close friends' and new close friends as 'GC close friends'. This chapter addresses the practices of intimacy and is mainly about communication and focuses on the ways in which Malaysian students interact with those friends in the specific context of living abroad. Most of the data discussed in this chapter are based

on the second phase of in-depth interviews, in which the second friendship maps as well as the friendship diaries were used.

As I argued in the previous chapters, not all close friendships are 'special' and I found that there are hierarchies in close friendships, represented by the arrangement of names on the concentric circle of the friendship maps. Indeed, the idea of 'familiarity as a family' has changed the ways in which Malaysian students practise intimacy with their family members and non-kin close friends; either with old or new close friends. I argue that friends and family relationships are not suffused. Instead, the 'familiarity as a family' brought the qualities of the family into close friendships. Besides focusing on the changes in the arrangement of names on the first and second friendship maps for both phases of data collection, I try to explore the connection between the names listed as close friends with the frequency of contact, the media use and the content of interaction that is reported on the students' friendship diaries. My data shows that face-to-face and social media are the main platforms of interaction in Malaysian students' close friendships. This has raised a question of whether these two mediums of interaction help to strengthen or weaken the intimacy in LD and GC close friendships.

Based on a survey reported by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2016), participating in social media is one of the most popular internet activities in Malaysia. From the data gathered in my study, I found that WhatsApp Messenger is reported to be most frequently used by Malaysian students to interact with their close friends among all types of social media listed by the

students. This is similar to the findings reported by the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (2016) which found that 92.7 percent of online activities involves text messaging. It is important to highlight that, as free messaging applications are available for smartphones, most of the online interaction in my study, whether with LD or GC close friends happened on WhatsApp Messenger. Although WhatsApp Messenger had not yet introduced video call functions during both phases of data collection, other WhatsApp Messenger's functions, for example, group chats, as well as voice calls, were frequently used by the students to communicate with their close friends as recorded in their friendship diaries.

It is important to highlight different types of social media used by the students in my study as I found they had significant impacts on the intimacy practices in close friendships. According to Chambers (2013) social media are mainly used to communicate with a remarkably small handful of people, largely made up of intimates. However, some students talked about why talking on the phone is better than texting, while others prefer to use WhatsApp Messenger compared to other social media such as Skype and Facetime due to different time zone and slow internet connections in Malaysia. In this chapter, it is important to discuss Malaysian students' experiences of intimate interactions in the context of living abroad as these findings show the ways in which they actually practice the 'ideal qualities of intimacy' as well as 'familiarity as a family' in this regard. Indeed, the intimacy practices reflect the emotional closeness that has been developed and maintained in LD and GC close friendships.

In this chapter, four major arguments are highlighted to understand the practices of intimacy in the students' close friendships. Firstly, I argue that physical distance leads to new patterns of interaction between the students and their close friends. Social media play a significant role, especially in LD close friendships. Most of the intimate interaction took place in an online context especially through text messenger as well as voice and video calls as a substitute face-to-face interaction between the students with LD close friends and to initiate face-to-face interaction with GC close friends. The ways in which they use social media to interact with their LD and GC close friends reflect the ways in which the students practice intimacy in close friendships. Thus, I discuss the patterns of interaction between the students with their LD and GC close friends in the first section of this chapter and discover how social media help to strengthen close friendships in the context of living temporarily abroad.

Secondly, I argue that as face and voice are the essential elements of intimate practices, lack of face-to-face contact in LD close friendships as well as physical distance have weakened the practices of intimacy. The students seek physical touch, immediacy and a sense of presence from LD close friends as they live away from each other but physical distance has lessened the chance for them to meet face-to-face regularly as well as to do physical activities and daily routine together. There are limitations regarding co-presence and immediacy in LD close friendships. The intimacy lessened due to lack of face-to-face meeting as well as infrequent contact through social media. Hence, in the second section of this chapter, I discuss the relationship between face and voice and intimate

interactions and explore the impact of face and voice in the closeness of friendships particularly in the context of temporary mobility abroad.

Although physical distance limits face-to-face meeting, co-presence and immediacy in LD close friendships, my third argument is that infrequent contact does not change the intimacy level between the students with some of their family members and childhood friends as they had already established these and they are not affected by distance. The students and LD close friends understand the limitation of intimacy practices, but they still feel emotionally close to each other. The situation of living abroad has changed the expectations and 'ideal qualities of intimacy' for family and friends. Some of the LD close friendships have been put 'on hold' when the students live abroad and eventually, a similar situation is expected to happen to GC close friendships when the students graduate from university and leave the UK for good. Therefore, in the third section of this chapter, I introduce a new concept of 'frozen friends' to discuss this matter. I argue that physical distance has frozen the intimacy practices in close friendships but not the bonds and intimacy level.

On the other hand, my data shows that the limitation of co-presence and immediacy due to physical distance has strengthened the GC close friends and new close friendships, and this is my fourth argument for this chapter. Based on my findings, I found that the students contacted their local co-national friends daily, and indeed multiple times a day especially with new close friends who lived in the same city and went to the same university. This is similar to Lim and Pham's (2016) findings that Malaysian students tend to interact with co-national

friends to get general updates, coordinate class attendance or meals, and school matters. New friends who live near to the students replace family members and long-established friends who live at a distance especially in gaining physical and emotional support. This will be discussed thoroughly in the final section of this chapter based on the concept of ‘familiarity as a family’ which I introduced in the previous chapter.

From these four arguments, this chapter answers the central debate of my study of whether physical distance has an impact on emotional distance in close friendships. This debate will foreground my discussion based on the four arguments addressed. As I have discussed the gender practices and ideal qualities of intimacy in the previous chapters, I will next focus on the intimate interactions in close friendships in this chapter based on two mediums of interaction: face-to-face and social media. In this chapter, I do not emphasize my analysis on the technological details of the media used for contact. Instead, I highlight the forms of intimacy achieved by the use of social media which enable close friendships to be strengthened in the context of temporary mobility abroad.

### **EMOTIONAL CONNECTEDNESS: FACE-TO-FACE VERSUS ONLINE INTERACTION**

It seems that it is a general assumption that when people move on to another geographical location, their personal relationships; friendships in particular, might fade away. However, my findings show that physical distance, time and

space should not only be seen as constraints as it also helps in strengthening and developing close friendships. My study acknowledges the changes in terms of practices, media use and routines of intimate interactions due to the students' temporary mobility to the UK. I highlight the intimacy practices via social media as one of the important platforms of interaction. Social media has become significant as living away from family and friends leads to fewer face-to-face meetings as it is too expensive for the students to go home frequently.

In this section, I argue that physical distance has changed the ways in which Malaysian students interact with their LD close friends. I found that the students use social media to replace as well as to initiate face-to-face interaction. However, physical distance has brought new practices of intimacy especially in the context of the online interaction. Accordingly, there are two parts to the discussion in this section: 1) patterns of interaction and 2) face, voice and intimacy, to explore these matters. The discussions in this section are significant to understand how physical distance and social media have changed the ways in which the students practise intimacy with their LD and GC close friends. It is important to explore the intimacy practices through meetings, phone calls, messenger, emoticons as well as exchanging pictures during non-co-presence while the students are living in the UK.

## **Patterns of Interaction**

Physical proximity seems to be one of the major factors that affect the ways in which Malaysian students communicated with their LD or GC close friends. In this section, I highlight the patterns of interaction and identify the similarities and differences in male and female students' intimacy practices based on their online interactions through social media and face-to-face interactions as well. The interactions patterns are summarised in Table 5.1 and 5.2 below. It is important to highlight that 8 out of 18 participants participated in the second phase of data collection. Four male students: Ken, Alvin, Adam and Alif and four female students: Yana, Aina, Lily and Mila were interested in recording their interactions with close friends in the friendship diaries. As the data were mainly gained through the three-week friendship diaries as well as the first and second friendship maps, there are four significant patterns that I will discuss in this section: 1) the addition or removal of close friends' names, 2) the frequency of contact, 3) the length of interaction and 4) the content of interaction. The intriguing question for this section is why do Malaysian students practise intimacy differently with their LD and GC close friends?

Table 5.1 Patterns of Interaction Over a Three-week Period

Gender	Name	No. of close friends	New no. of close friends	New names added or removed as close friends		Frequency of Contact (for three weeks)		Length of Interaction			Medium of Interaction			
				LD friends	GC friends	LD friends	GC friends	1-30 minutes	<1 hour	>1 hour	Face-to-face	WhatsApp/Chat/SMS	Voice/Video Calls	Facebook/Instagram
MALE	<i>Ken</i>	20	18	+1	-7 (+4)	1	20	9	5	7	19	2	0	0
	<i>Alvin</i>	20	13	-9	-3 (+5)	0	36	3	1	32	30	19	3	1
	<i>Adam</i>	18	18	0	0	18	2	0	18	2	2	18	0	0
	<i>Alif</i>	17	14	-3 (+3)	-3	16	25	17	11	13	38	8	4	0
FEMALE	<i>Yana</i>	13	14	-3	+4	16	42	24	4	30	36	20	1	8
	<i>Aina</i>	20	21	0	+1	40	14	48	1	5	14	36	3	1
	<i>Lily</i>	14	14	0	0	33	31	51	5	8	26	23	7	8
	<i>Mila</i>	20	16	-4	0	42	8	25	2	23	18	38	15	1

Table 5.2 Content of Interaction Over a Three-week Period

Gender	Name	Gender	Person Initiated the Interaction			Content of Interaction											
			<i>Participant</i>	<i>Friend</i>	<i>Both</i>	<i>Daily activities</i>	<i>University Life</i>	<i>Home</i>	<i>Other People</i>	<i>Emotional Sharing</i>	<i>Health and Wellbeing</i>	<i>Plan and Future</i>	<i>Travel/Holidays</i>	<i>Interest and Hobbies</i>	<i>Thoughts/Opinions</i>	<i>Information/Current News</i>	<i>Support/Help</i>
<b>MALE</b>	<i>Ken</i>	Male	16	5	0	/	/	/	/		/						
	<i>Alvin</i>	Male	13	15	8	/	/	/			/		/			/	
	<i>Adam</i>	Male	2	9	9	/	/	/				/	/				
	<i>Alif</i>	Male	16	25	0	/	/	/	/		/		/	/			
<b>FEMALE</b>	<i>Yana</i>	Female	16	32	10	/	/	/	/		/	/	/			/	
	<i>Aina</i>	Female	13	18	0	/	/	/	/	/	/		/	/	/	/	/
	<i>Lily</i>	Female	26	38	0	/	/	/	/	/	/	/	/			/	/
	<i>Mila</i>	Female	18	7	9	/	/		/	/	/	/					

The data gathered from the second phase of data collection includes the interviews and the second friendship maps derived from the friendship diaries. It is interesting to see that the ways in which male and female students communicated with their close friends are by some means similar to general assumptions about men's and women's friendships discussed earlier in Chapter Three. Table 5.1 shows the changes in the number of close friends after three weeks. After the students completed the three-week diary, I did the second in-depth interviews and asked them to list the names of their close friends and arrange them on the second friendship maps. The students were allowed to include or remove the names that they had listed on the first friendship maps during the first phase of data collection as well as the new names they recorded in their three-week friendship diaries.

I compared the first and second friendship maps and asked the students about the changes in terms of the position of names and the names added or removed. I found that half added at least one GC friend as a close friend and removed at least three close friends who were living at-a-distance. Ken and Alif were the only students who added their LD friends as close friends after three weeks. However, recent physical proximity was the central reason for this addition. Ken added one of his long-established friend who had visited him in the UK and stayed at his house for two to three days. Although they had not met each other since high school, Ken talked about how he got emotional when he remembered the memories of shared experiences in the past.

KEN: One of my high school seniors in Malaysia came to the UK as an exchange student. We did not meet each other for three to four years. She came to visit me and stayed at my house for three days. Sometimes friends are like this. You did not see each other for quite a while, but when you see them, nothing changes. I was a little bit emotional when I sent her off. Although I did not meet her for three to four years, I got very emotional and already feel close to her after three days and two nights spend time and living in the same house together.

The concept of 'fossil' friends suggested by Spencer and Pahl (2006, p.74) is relevant to describe this kind of friendship. Although Ken and his senior had not contacted each other for a while, Ken still felt the sense of presence and found that their close friendship was re-activated when they met each other in the UK, although only for a couple of days. Sharing similar social space and doing similar physical activities brought the spark back to the old friendship. Besides that, Alif's case is quite similar to Ken's as he added three of his friends who lived in a different city in the UK as close friends. During this three-week period, Alif has participated in Islamic programmes in the city where those friends lived. They were included as close friends as he spent more time with them, stayed at their house for a couple of days and shared his personal problems with them.

ALIF: I just realised that I did many activities with those guys for this past three weeks. I met them every time I go to city M and I stayed at their house as we had Islamic programmes that we want to go on that weekend. We are getting closer as we did a lot of activities together. I also faced a lot of problems for this past three weeks and I shared some of my problems with them. For me, there is a higher tendency for me to talk and share my

problems with my friends when we meet. When I got a good response from them, I felt emotionally connected to them and tend to share more things with them.

I found that Ken and Alif shared a similar pattern of inclusion of new names as close friends and this is a result of temporary physical proximity. The frequent face-to-face meeting has developed emotional closeness between Ken and Alif with their friends. This situation has raised a question of whether face-to-face contact has a significant impact on intimate practices between the students and their close friends, which I will discuss in the next section. Indeed, the 'familiarity as a family' concept as discussed in the previous chapter is significant to describe this situation. Although Ken and Alif only stayed in the same house with their friends for a couple of days, being in a house created a family-like familiarity. The routines, such as cooking, eating, getting a taxi and going to programmes together have created some activities, spaces and times which reminds the students of being in a family. Consequently, familiarity makes a sense of family connection. The students started to act like a family and now feel emotionally connected with their close friends although this intimate practice happened only for a couple of days.

Based on Table 5.1, I found that the male students were reported to have fewer interactions with their close friends compared to female students and they prefer to interact with GC close friends compared to LD close friends. Indeed, I found that Ken and Alvin did not contact any of their LD close friends during this three-week period. Although Adam has frequently contacted his GC close friends as reported in the diaries, those friends are not included as close friends. He only

had two interactions with his high school friend, who is also studying at the same university as him in the UK. In contrast to male students, I found that female students had more interactions with their LD close friends, especially family members. However, Yana, who added four new names of GC friends as close friends, is reported to interact frequently with her new close friends formed in the UK who are also studying at the same university.

Another significant intimate interaction patterns that I found in my study is that most of the interactions happened for less than an hour except face-to-face ones that take place for more than an hour, particularly with GC close friends. I have categorized the medium of interactions that are usually used by the students to interact with their close friends into four types: 1) face (face-to-face interaction), 2) text (chat, SMS and Messenger), 3) call (voice and video calls) and 4) page (Facebook and Instagram). Sandel (2014, p.3) argues that “the experience of being an international student living away from home is qualitatively different today from what it was years before”. From text-based messages such as email, instant messaging and phone texting to social websites, visual images and video streaming such as Facebook and Skype, the Internet and smartphone have reduced the “perception of distance” (Sandel 2014, p.3) and made it easier for the international students to keep updated with family and friends back home. The creation of personal profiles on social media pages, such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter help to connect people worldwide, and become a platform for social interaction and allow the expression of personal information, such as gender, interest, education and location (Lambert 2013).

Table 5.1 above illustrates that the students have more face-to-face contact compared to online interaction. Indeed, I found that Alvin and Lily have started the interaction with their GC close friends by text messages through WhatsApp Messenger and continue the interaction through face-to-face meetings a couple of times as reported in their friendship diaries. A report by Duggan (2015) shows that 49 percent of young adults use messaging apps such as WhatsApp and iMessage. Similar to this report, I found that messaging apps are frequently used by Malaysian students compared to other social media. These apps allow mobile users to message one another without using up SMS data, which is required when exchanging traditional text messages. Besides that, their near-synchronicity allows the users to create and maintain continuous contact with friends and to deliberate on what they want to communicate before communicating (Abeelee 2016). Indeed, today's messaging apps are not limited to using just text. I found that the students also include pictures and videos in the messages, use automatically delete sent messages, such as Snapchat and messaging apps linked to other social media pages, for a quick chat.

Besides that, I found that female students called their close friends at least once, either by voice or video calls, within this three-week period. Most of these voice interactions happened between the students with their LD close friends, mostly with their family members. Mila recorded that she had made voice and video calls frequently with her LD close friends, especially with her boyfriend who is studying in Australia. The male students, on the other hand, prefer to send text messages to their close friends, including their family members. In addition, they rarely used the social media pages such as Facebook and Instagram to interact

with their close friends and did not record any interactions with their close friends on these pages. The male students claimed that leaving likes and comments are just normal activities on social media and not intimate enough to be recorded in the diary. However, they became 'lurkers' or 'invisible audiences' (Boyd 2007, p.3) as they get updated about their friends through these pages although they did not contact each other directly. I found that it is important to explore the relationship between face, text, call and page interaction and the emotional connection between the students and their LD and GC close friends, which I will discuss further in the next section.

During the second phase of data collection, most of the participants were busy with the coursework submission and examinations as well as getting prepared for a new term. They talked about how busy they were during this three-week period which meant they had to spend precious time in conversation with the close friends especially those who are at-a-distance. It is notable in the friendship diaries that most of the interactions recorded were initiated by the close friends instead of the students. Most of the interactions recorded are mainly about daily and university life, which particularly took place with the GC close friends. Besides that, GC close friends also are contacted for physical support and help. On the other hand, the interactions between the students with their LD close friends were more about catching up about life as well as talking about holiday plan and the future.

Although a three-week period cannot totally represent the intimate practices of the students and their close friends, I found that there were still significant

differences between male and female students. Female students tended to be homesick and share emotional thoughts with their close friends compared to male students. Female students are also reported to frequently ask their close friends, especially their family members who lived in Malaysia, about their health condition and well-being compared to male students. Indeed, female students not only listed more names of their family members but also had frequent contact with them. I found that the female students called their family members at least once a week and actively texted them through group chat in WhatsApp Messenger. Although Adam had frequent contacts with his mother and brother as recorded in his friendship diary, they are still not included as close friends.

Based on this data, I argue that female students put extra effort to initiate the conversation with their close friends, both long and close distance, and had frequent interactions despite their busy schedules as university students. Felmler et al. (2012) suggest that female students place a higher value on contacting their close friends and their connectedness to others than male students. The gender difference is significant as care is also strongly gendered and principally identified with women (Morgan 2011a). Female students are shown to be more caring than male students as they regularly initiated the conversations with their family members and close friends to get updated about their life and well-being. However, the different time zone influenced the frequency of contact as well as the media use. Indeed, the temporary status of living abroad has a significant impact on the way in which Malaysian students practice intimacy with their LD and GC close friends. Accordingly, I will discuss

the effort and intimacy in more depth to understand the status of friendship of LD and GC close friends later in this chapter.

### **Face, Voice and Intimacy**

It is important to highlight that face-to-face meeting is essential for the development and maintenance of close relationships. Although the interaction via social media re-creates the ideas of proximity and distance, closeness and farness as well as solidity and imagination (Urry 2002), I argue that face, place and moment are necessary for the development of a sense of presence and immediacy. Meeting up, sharing physical space and spending time together in LD close friendships are the main concerns of this chapter and these issues have also been discussed in recent studies (Cronin 2014b; Policarpo 2016). However, the respondents in these previous studies are 30 years of age and above, and the mobility took place due to education and employment.

Temporary residence abroad inevitably results in lack of face-to-face and physical contact, for example, hugging and kissing, which I consider as essential elements in intimacy practices. This physical contact and social cues can be communicated and imagined by the help of social media; for example, through videos, photos and emoticons/emoji – mobile-phone-specific pictorial signs (Miyake 2007). Nevertheless, the sense of presence and closeness through a face-to-face meeting and physical touch cannot be substituted by social media. Therefore, in this section, I discuss the reasons for face and voice as essential elements in intimate practices in close friendship.

As I have discussed earlier in this chapter, social media is used as a compliment for face-to-face interaction. I argue that there are strong associations between face-to-face interaction and social media as people use social media as part of their daily routine. Social media should be understood as a mixed modality that combines elements of face-to-face communication with elements of written communication. There is a general assumption that social cues are being reduced by both phone calls and the internet, making interaction less intimate. Nevertheless, Baym (2010) found that lack of social cues and the asynchronicity of online interaction did not lead to impoverished close relationships. There are social cues specific to digital formats, such as emoticons, caps lock as well as photos and videos, which enable us to capture emotional nuance and allow us to convey friendliness, build intimacy, express strong emotions and recreate familiarity (Baym 2010).

Asynchronous interaction not only allows people to revise and to reply when they like, but it also discourages the “sense of placelessness” (Baym 2010, p.8). I argue that online interactions make the students feel more together when they are apart. However, I found that the ‘sense of presence’ is the key reason why the students ideally prefer face-to-face meetings over online conversations. Video calls became an alternative for a face-to-face meeting as it enables the students to look at their friends’ face and hear their voices even though they are physically away from each other. Here, Alvin talked about how social media blurred the physical distance especially through his interactions with friends at-a-distance.

ALVIN: When I make a video call and see their faces, I can feel their presence although they are away. I feel closer to them, and it seems like they are here with me, physically. Social media helps me to keep in touch with those who are away and helps us to get connected. But, for me, face-to-face contact is still the best.

I argue that seeing a face and hearing a voice, especially someone who is physically absent develops emotional connectedness and closeness in friendship. The students feel closer in terms of distance and emotions, and they can feel the presence of each other although the conversation takes place in virtual space. Chambers (2013, p.118) suggests that video calls give the illusion of co-presence as it has the quality of enabling individuals to participate in a family gathering, for example, since it is synchronous and dialogic. In this case, I argue that seeing a face and hearing a voice are necessary for intimacy because it gives a sense of presence which I suggest is an essential element in developing and maintaining close friendships. Indeed, facial expression delivers emotions which I found important in intimate interactions. Here, Lily talked about how facial expression affected her decision whether to share her personal problems with her close friends or not.

LILY: I always look at my friends' facial expression every time I share my problems with them. I can capture their emotions when I look at their face. Through their expression, I know whether they are interested in listening to my story or not. When they show their sadness or sympathy, I feel like I have been comforted by that response and expression. This only can be

done by looking at the face. I cannot capture that feelings and emotions when texting my friends.

The social cues are not reduced in online communication, but the format is changed. Students get less contact through facial expression, body language, gesture and lack of proximity to some of their close friends. However, other formats of social cues, such as emoji, animated GIFs, photos, voices and videos have changed the ways in which the students communicate with their close friends as well as their practices of intimacy. These social cues have enhanced the words and feelings that the students wanted to express to their close friends. I found that the students felt a greater sense of closeness to their close friends, especially those who are at-a-distance when they used social media for communication. While the physical distance between countries has not changed, the virtual and perceptual distance has decreased (Sandel 2014). Social media offers affective richness due to their provision of colourful and evocative emoji and stickers that users can appropriate to enliven their messages, injecting them with fun and feeling (Lim and Pham 2016). Here, Aina talked about how emoji has turned the boring text into a fun conversation.

AINA: Emoji has enhanced the feeling that we want to convey. When I use certain emoji in a right situation, it can clarify whether I want to show my angry, sad or happy face. For example, when I texted my sister to tell something funny, the use of emoji makes the conversation feel hilarious and makes me laugh so hard.

Although emoji helps people to convey their feelings and has face-like icons, the number of emoji that can be used on social media is limited. They cannot totally replace the facial expression, body language, gesture and proximity, although they help to enhance the feelings. Social media allows asynchronous conversation and in a given situation, the words and emoji used are not enough to convey the sense of connectedness and intimacy. There are no specific emoji and words that can replace the physical affection such as hugging and patting to console another person who is physically distant. Here, Adam and Anis talked about why some emoji could convey incorrect feelings in the conversation and could lead to misunderstanding.

ADAM: Facial expression can express better than the emoji. Emoji is limited. There is only one emoji to show certain expression.

ANIS: There is no emoji that is really specific to show certain feelings. If I use the emoji that shows sarcastic face for joking, some people might take it in a wrong way.

Indeed, the students argued that online interactions are not intimate enough and unable to convey their specific affection toward certain situations compared to a face-to-face meeting. Although Skype and other video chat applications offer many social cues including voice and facial expression, they still lack critical intimacy including touch and smell (Baym 2010). As I have discussed earlier in the previous chapter, Alif, who established and maintained his close friendships especially with same-gender friends through religious activities called *usrah*, talked about his experience of using Skype to conduct these

sharing sessions once or twice a month. He argued that there are limitations in video calls as they are not as intimate as a face-to-face meeting. In addition, he talked about the importance of face-to-face interaction to maintain close relationships, although people are already connected via social media.

ALIF: I use Skype to replace face-to-face interaction, for *usrah* to be specific. But, it still cannot replace the impact of face-to-face. Before this, I think Skype is already enough for interaction. But, at one point, I feel like it is not enough and I cannot give a full emotion towards it. I give more focus on people when I see them face-to-face than on video call. I know that it is hard to meet people especially who live at-a-distance, but I think it is important to continue the meetings through social media. But, the relationship in social media is really vague and seems not real. To make it real, you have to meet. Social media is a complement to face-to-face interactions, not as a substitute. It cannot stand alone.

Even though social media has become the alternative for face-to-face interaction due to physical distance, the interaction needs to be continued through face-to-face meetings. Lack of face-to-face contact in LD close friendships as well as distinct social and physical space have weakened the practices of intimacy. Skype and other video call technologies have fostered a sense of immediacy and have shrunk the sense of distance to alleviate pressure and feelings of homesickness that can arise when a student is alone and far from home (Sandel 2014). However, synchronous interaction – to meet or even to make a video call is difficult due to physical distance, the different time zone and poor internet connections. Indeed, the students and close friends need to

set up a specific date and time to interact with each other via social media. Intimate interaction requires effort from both parties to ensure that the scheduled interaction time is fruitful and continuous. In this case, Jason talked about the struggle with video calling due to the issues of convenient mutual time and internet connection.

JASON: A phone call is more intimate compared to texting. Sometimes I make a video call, but I prefer voice call because of most of the time when I want to make a video call I need to set the time with my friends. The internet connection in Malaysia is not really good and we cannot do a video call while walking or doing some other stuff. The voice call is easier and less worry.

It is interesting to explore how the students define intimacy and its practices on social media. I argue that social cues on social media, for example, facial expression and emoji, are important in building intimacy, despite the risks of misinterpretation. Social media with minimal social cues such as chat messenger were reported as being less intimate compared to video and voice calls. The question arises here is what are the reasons that make Jason, as well as other Malaysian students, use WhatsApp Messenger frequently, especially texts and group chat, even though only minimal social cues are found in these features? In contrast to Baym's (2010) findings that asynchronous interaction has weakened close relationships and makes people feel distant, my data shows that Malaysian students prefer to use texts and group chats on WhatsApp Messenger because it is easy to use and at the same time it requires

fewer expectations and obligations of immediacy. Here, Aina talked about how asynchronous conversation allows people to think before giving a reply.

AINA: In a face-to-face meeting, we need to think of what we want to say and if we do not like to talk about it, we still need to give a prompt reply. But, it is different in WhatsApp, for example. We can see a person typing for five minutes in a WhatsApp conversation, but only one word: OKAY, for instance, came out as a reply. If you meet people face-to-face, you cannot take back what you have already said.

Texting and group chatting allows asynchronous interaction which enable the users to have time to think, revise and reply to the messages. Indeed, the students talked about how texting and group chatting allows them to control their emotions due to lack of facial expression and physical touch. I found that the students can avoid worriedness and misunderstanding as their close friends at-a-distance cannot hear any changes in voice and facial expressions. In contrast to the ongoing conversation through phone calls, the students can send their friends a message and it does not matter when the other person reads and replies. They feel less obliged or disappointed to give or to get immediate replies especially from/to friends who live in another country with a different time zone. Different time zone, poor internet connection, as well as changes in personal commitment and routines, became barriers for real-time interactions when living abroad. The students talked about their disappointment about delays in answering calls and hassles in planning a meeting due to physical distance. Even though face-to-face meetings, as well as voice and video calls, are more intimate than texting, the situation changes the ways in which Malaysian

students practise intimacy with their close friends, especially those who are at-a-distance.

Lack of social cues and emotional expression are also significant for maintenance of LD close friendships. Social cues and emotional expression through social media, especially video and voice call, not only give the illusion of co-presence, but also give the students a 'reminder' of separation. I found that the feelings of not being able to 'be there' physically creates more disappointment for the students who are living abroad. Social media helps to blur the distance and maintains the close friendships at-a-distance, but the social cues in social media are still not enough to deliver emotional expression especially in critical situations. To use Lily's case as an example, as discussed in the previous chapter, Lily experienced her uncle's death and a few days before the second interview, her father was admitted to the hospital. This situation made Lily feels homesick and anxious. She talked about how physical distance limits her intimacy practices with her loved ones although they can communicate through social media.

LILY: This week my dad is being admitted to hospital. He fell off his motorbike, broke his ribs and cannot get up. He did not want to tell me about this, but my mom decides to broke this news to me. It was a shock to me. I feel like going home right now, but my mom does not allow me. But now I feel relieved because my brother who is studying in Cairo is going home. At least he is there to look after my dad and my mom.

Although smartphones and social media have given the students the ability to maintain close friendships across long distances, lack of physical proximity does affect the intimacy practices. Cantó-Milà et al. (2016), in their study, argue that although communication via smartphones is important in relationship maintenance, LD relationships had to deal with “higher expectations, verbal overshadowing and individual facets” (p.2409). Online interaction became part of the imagined dreams in which people imagined the reaction from a text message and they pictured that the other person ideally was there for them, interested and caring for what they have to say (Cantó-Milà et al. 2016). However, I argue that physical distance limits the emotional connectedness as the students feel a lack of co-presence and immediacy in their intimacy practices. Lack of face-to-face and bodily contact as well as distinct social and physical space brought disappointment and weakened the practices of intimacy which become a major problem in maintaining LD close friendships. In my study, I found that the temporary period of living abroad has changed the ways in which Malaysian students practise and maintain intimacy. Although the students long for and imagine intimacy especially physical contact, such as hugging and celebrating events together, this has not become a significant issue in some of their LD close friendships, especially with family members and childhood friends as I have discussed in the previous chapter.

The students already established close bonds with some of their LD close friends and there are unwritten expectations of close friendship at-a-distance which allows them to maintain their close friendship despite infrequent contact. According to Jurkane-Hobein (2015), as social media allows daily interaction, it

has changed the expectations about intimacy practices and created a certain pressure to communicate. However, I found that despite feelings of uncertainty due to the inability to interact every day and the consequent loss of daily intimacy, the students only wanted to get updated about their close friends' life occasionally and not as a daily routine. I argue that the temporary period of living abroad has changed the need and expectations of intimate interactions, especially with LD close friends. Based on the friendship diaries, I found that the students frequently interacted with their family members, partners and new friends, but they still talked about the close bonds and memories that they have with old friends despite having infrequent contact. I will discuss more of this matter based on the temporary status of living abroad in the next section.

### **TEMPORARY STATUS OF FRIENDSHIP**

The previous section provides a brief overview of the intimacy practices via face-to-face and social media. It then goes on to discuss the significance of face and voice in intimate interactions with LD and GC close friends. I argue about how physical distance changes the ways in which Malaysian students practise intimacy in terms of methods, expectations and interaction routines. In this section, the major issues that I will discuss are the temporary status of LD and GC close friendships and its impact on close friends; a different important angle to be highlighted in my study. The questions that arise are whether physical distance makes LD close friendships feel less connected and whether physical proximity strengthens GC close friendships. As the students are living in the UK for a short period, what will happen to these friendships?

As I have discussed earlier in the previous chapter, I found that one of the notable issues regarding LD close friendship is infrequent contact. Based on friendship diaries, the students had frequent contact with their new close friends who are geographically close compared to family members and long-established close friends who live at-a-distance. Nevertheless, the students claimed that their relationships with these LD close friends are still close and strong compared to their new close friends who mostly live in the same city and study in the same university as them. It is interesting to find that temporary period of living abroad does not totally weaken LD close friendships. Hence, in the first part of this section, I introduce a new concept of 'frozen friendship' to understand the intimacy practices and friendship status between Malaysian students and their LD close friends.

On the other hand, there is an issue that GC close friends formed abroad are perceived as an alternative for LD close friends. Although these friendships are new, they turn into close friendships due to physical proximity. Physical proximity has brought changes to intimacy practices as new friends established in the UK are reported to give more immediate responses and a sense of presence as they share similar physical space and activities. Although they acquired a 'familiarity as a family' relationships, new close friendships formed abroad are claimed to be not as close as those with family members and long-established friends. The students anticipated that once they had finished their study and gone back to Malaysia for good, new friends abroad will turn into LD close friends and they will face the similar situation that is currently faced by long-established friends who were at-a-distance. Thus, it is important to discuss

the association between intimacy practices, the status of friendship and temporary status of being abroad in the next section.

### **Frozen Friendships: Friends Back Home**

Living abroad for more than a year in the UK has created a new sense of 'home' as the students feel more comfortable and no longer feel like a tourist. The feelings and idea of comfort and 'home' have lessened the feelings of being "out of place" (Prazeres 2016, p.11), as the students became familiar with their life abroad. Indeed, the sense of familiarity has changed the intimacy practices, which turns new friends abroad into close friends; I used the term 'familiarity as a family' to describe this in the previous chapter. However, I argue that these feelings and ideas of 'home' affect the intimacy practices with LD close friends. As previously mentioned, new life abroad limits the intimate interactions between Malaysian students and their LD close friends as they do not share similar physical and social space as well as the time zone. For that reason, the students reported having infrequent contact with their LD close friends. Thus, it is important to highlight in this chapter whether infrequent contact has discouraged intimacy practices and affected the maintenance of close friendships.

My central argument in this chapter is that physical distance impacts on the ways in which emotionally supportive practices are engaged in, but friendship is clearly not discouraged by such distance. I found that LD close friendships continue across time and space as friends have established a trust that

develops from shared emotions, comfort, confidences and regular contacts before going abroad. Although the students did not have daily interactions with LD close friends, they keep updated through social media. The different time zone, personal commitment and interactions do not need to be mutual and synchronous. Synchronous offline communication, especially face-to-face meeting, is least expensive when friends are local, whereas social media provide inexpensive relational maintenance across distance (Ellison et al. 2007). Thus, social media allows the students to look at the posts on the Facebook and Instagram pages or reply to WhatsApp group chat, for example, without the need for an immediate response.

I found that the students invest time and effort to maintain the strong ties with family members and old friends by making use of the technologies available to them. In this way, they can perpetuate their close friendships by practising emotional support across time and space. I argue that there is a need for mutual understanding in the context of living abroad and unwritten expectations of LD relationships to facilitate the maintenance of close friendship ties. This is because day-to-day intimacy that eases sociability is hard to maintain over an extended time of physical absence (Ashtar et al. 2017). Accordingly, I found that the analogy of 'frozen food' used by one of the male students, Ken, to describe his relationships with long-established close friends in Malaysia as interesting to be highlighted in my study. In this case, Ken only listed one long-established close friend out of 18 close and important friends as he felt that his relationships with them was in a 'pause' period. Ken argued that his old

friendships are neither close nor distant as they mutually understand that life changes when they are growing up.

KEN: At this moment, I did not have many old friends that I wanted to list down here [in a friendship maps]. It is not that they are no longer important to me. It is just like frozen food. If you want to eat, you can put the food in the microwave, and it is still edible. It is just that kind of feeling. We did not contact each other since I live abroad. Our friendship is in a 'pause' mode. [...] We might not find a mutual interest, but I cannot say that we are no longer friends. When I am going back to Malaysia for good, we are still a friend, and we can hang out together, and I still can talk about many things. But, we might not be as close as before. We will never be the same again because life is about change and it is not a good or a bad thing.

Based on the quotes above, Ken felt that his old friendships, especially with schoolmates and college mates are not as intimate as before he was living abroad. He felt the changes in his long-established friendships and felt more intimate with his new friends in the UK as he claimed that it was difficult to maintain LD close friendships. I argue that although the students have developed mutual understanding and expectations in their friendships, physical contact, immediacy and co-presence are essential in sustaining intimacy in friendships. Based on this finding, I use Ken's term of *frozen friendship* as a new concept to describe intimacy practices in some of LD close friendships. I argue that physical distance 'freezes' the intimacy practices between the students and close friends at-a-distance. This type of friend is quite similar to what Spencer and Pahl (2006) called 'pick up where you left off' friends. The

friendship is secure enough to withstand a long-period of separation and there is no need to maintain the relationships with regular and frequent contact at a distance.

However, I found the concept 'frozen friendship' is more relevant to describe the 'practices' which I found frozen in these relationships. I argue that the LD close friendships did not become less intimate or turn into weak ties, but the practices of close friendship are temporarily 'on hold'. The students still feel the presence and importance of these friends in their life. These friends are 'just there' in the back of their mind and the students also include them in their plans especially for summer break when they plan to go back to Malaysia for three months. These are the reasons of why these friends are still included as close friends although they are not contacted and seen frequently. Here, Alvin talked about how living away from each other makes it hard for him to meet his close friends regularly, although some of them are also in the UK.

ALVIN: Although some of my friends live in London while I live in X city, we understand that sometimes we cannot meet each other because everyone is busy. For me, I do not need to talk to you every day for you to know that I am your friend. We already are matured enough to think that sometimes at a certain period of time that we have our own life. But, while we are living our lives, they should know that I am still their friend. The situations that make it hard to interact frequently at this moment. Do not expect me to message you every day. If you have that expectation, I would not be friend with you in the first place.

The temporary status of being abroad has changed the practices of intimacy between the students and some of their long-established friends, but not their close bonds or the students' identities. Indeed, this temporary status of being abroad is mutually understood and expected in their friendships since the students decided to study abroad. There were unwritten reciprocal expectations in LD relationships in which both parties understand the challenges to maintain the relationships in most cases with the barriers of the different time zone and lack of physical contact. Here, Mila talked about how reciprocity is essential in LD close friendships.

MILA: Everyone has their own lives and luckily my friends and I understand about this. We did not contact each other every day, even in our WhatsApp group chat. Everyone is busy and with the time difference, it will be redundant if we talked about anything through WhatsApp. Usually, we will call each other and spill everything, either good news or bad one. When one of us need help, no one in the group felt bad about it or said 'you only contact us when you need help'. I also found quotes shared by them on social media which indirectly means that 'infrequent contact does not mean that we are no longer best friends'. This is what I feel about our friendship and I know that they share the same feeling as mine.

It seems that infrequent contact does not change the intimacy level between the students with some of their family members and childhood friends as they already have established intimate relationships that are not affected by distance. This is similar to findings by Becker et al. (2009) who claimed that LD friendships are not fragile but have tremendous potential for resiliency. Indeed, they argued

that friendship levels and commitment are not static and stable, but shift over time. However, I found that not all close friendships acquired this level of intimacy as only certain close friends are perceived as 'special' as I have discussed in the previous chapter. In this case, reciprocity and mutual understanding as intimacy practices in LD friendships became the key factors for the close friendship maintenance. Although the intimate practices for some LD close friendships are temporarily 'frozen' due to physical distance, time difference and personal commitments, the students imagined that the friendships and intimacy practices will return to normal – like before they went abroad, when they meet each other during the summer break as well as when they go back to Malaysia for good, after graduation.

However, I found that the students talked about the awkward feelings with their friends when they returned to Malaysia and met each other during the summer break or when they talked about things and routines in the UK via social media with them. Robertson (2016) claim that the feelings of 'not belonging' and 'not fitting in' happens when people feel uneasy to show their new self in encounters with old friends. Accordingly, it seems that personal transformation after living abroad, although for a short period, makes the students feel anxious and concerned to choose the topics to talk about when they meet with their long-established close friends during the summer break. Indeed, in some cases, LD close friends have turned into *fossil friends* – “there is still some trace or imprint of the relationship, but the friendship is essentially on the back burner, to be re-activated in the future or allowed, gradually, to end” (Spencer and Pahl 2006,

pp.74–75). In my study some of the names listed in the first phase of data collection were dropped later due to infrequent contact.

Alvin, Alif, Yana and Mila dropped some of the names of their LD close friends on their maps during the second phase of data collection as they had irregular and infrequent contact, although they still felt some sense of presence. The students had more frequent meetings with new friends abroad and shared the similar experience of living abroad which resulted in these fossil friendships gradually come to an end. Some LD close friends turn into frozen and fossil friends even though these friendships are claimed as strong and close ones, more so than new friendships which are geographically close. Consequently, what is the status of GC close friends in this temporary situation of living abroad? I will discuss this matter next.

### **Temporary Intimate: New Friends Abroad**

It is important to highlight that during the ‘frozen’ period of intimacy practices of LD close friendship, the students developed and strengthened their friendship ties with new friends who are geographically close. These new friendships formed abroad turn into close ties due to lack of immediacy, co-presence and not sharing similar physical and social spaces with LD close friends. However, the length of friendship still influenced the development of close friendships between the students and GC new friends. Here, Alif and Zain talked about how the sense of ‘home’ and familiarity as well as physical contact has strengthened

his friendship with new close friends formed abroad although it takes time to establish these close friendships.

ALIF: When I was in my first year, I feel like old friends are important in my life because I did not yet meet anyone who shares a similar mindset as mine and I cannot adapt to the situations of living abroad at that moment. I feel like these long-distance friends are needed to stabilise this new situation. But, once I enter my second year, I try to adapt to people who are geographically close to me. I started to rely on them. Long-distance friends are still important to me but they are not reliable for emergency stuff, especially things that happen here in the UK. I still need them to consult about big things that will give a big impact in my life including decision making and complicated personal problems.

ZAIN: At first, I feel awkward and try to control my jokes so that they [new friends] did not feel offended. But, once we are getting close to each other, I can talk to them about anything and feel that they are getting important in my life. If they are not here, I might not feel happy and complete. It is different from my friends in Malaysia because I cannot see them face-to-face. It is more fun to meet face-to-face instead of talking through Skype or WhatsApp. We cannot do physical activities together. But, I still find them if I want to share my problems. I am still not comfortable to share my problems with my new friends here. We are not open to sharing it.

I argue that the practices of intimacy with new friends are not similar to family members and long-established friends. Although new friends are needed for face-to-face and physical activities, LD close friends are still important to

discuss and share about personal and non-urgent matters. This finding is similar to Weiner and Hannum's (2012) who claimed that LD close friends might be more oriented toward emotional attentiveness, rather than informative advice or tangible support. In my study, the students believe that some of their new close friendships are temporary and only needed for physical support, but they cannot survive the distance compared to long-established close friends. The students talked about how they might not be as close as their friendships now in the UK when they are going back to Malaysia for good, after graduation. Here, Izhan and Fira shared their feelings about their new friends who are geographically close to them and the situation that might happen once they are going back to Malaysia.

IZHAN: I think we will meet each other once we are in Malaysia. But I think we might infrequently contact each other. This is similar to what has happened to my old friends in Malaysia. It is vice versa. That means if I go back to Malaysia after my graduation or even just for a holiday, I might not contact my new friends here in the UK every day. But, I know that we will meet again someday in Malaysia when everyone has graduated.

FIRA: I do not think that when we graduated and went back to Malaysia for good, we will hang out together like we used to do in the UK. We will infrequently keep in touch with each other. I know that I will be distant myself once we were no longer live here. If that particular friend did not put any effort to stay close to me, I would never put the same effort to maintain our friendship. For me, we are close here just because we do not have anyone else except our self in the UK. It is more like we need each other as we faced the similar situation here.

The students imagined that their close friendships with new friends formed abroad would be fragile once they return to Malaysia. I argue that some of the new close friends are not as important as family members and old friends as most of the students, except Ken, Sweeli and Yana, did not have any plan to meet with those friends when they graduated. They felt uncertain about their new close friendships once they are living away from each other. Ken, Sweeli and Yana talked about the challenges that they will face when they need to leave exciting experiences and new friends once they return to Malaysia after graduating. This is also reported in recent studies (see Kartoshkina 2015; Wilson and Arendale 2011) that there are 'bitter-sweet' of re-entry experiences in terms of students' feelings, communication experiences, and perspectives toward their home culture. Indeed, the stages of the adjustment process upon return are much the same when the students first arrive overseas. Therefore, it is important for future research to focus on the re-entry experiences after studying abroad as this is also related to the intimacy practices in close friendships.

## **CONCLUSION**

To summarise this chapter, I argue that geographical distance, different time zone, as well as physical space did not totally weaken the close friendships or became one of the factors of emotional disconnection. I found that close friendships do not depend on the frequency of contact or the related variable of distance between friends, but it depends on the strength of the bond. Although face-to-face meeting and spending more time together are important relational

currencies mainly during the initial phase of close friendships' development, I argue that close friendships can endure long-distance and infrequent contacts. As undergraduate students, most of my participants go back to Malaysia for three months during the summer break. While for masters taught students, they stay in the UK for a year until graduation. Accordingly, the limitation of meetings and physical contact have changed the ways in which students are practising intimacy in close friendships.

This chapter concludes that physical distance does affect the ways in which the students practise intimacy. They use social media as the main medium of interaction with LD close friends as it is costly – in terms of finance and time, to travel to Malaysia to meet each other frequently. However, lack of face-to-face meetings in LD close friendships as well as distinct social and physical space have weakened the practices of intimacy. The sense of presence and immediacy are limited as students that are friends live away from each other and this affects the ways in which the students perceived their closeness in LD friendships. However, infrequent contact does not change the intimacy level between the students with some of their LD close friends especially family members and childhood friends as the intimate relationships are already established and are not affected by distance.

Nevertheless, some LD close friends turn into frozen and fossil friends. The concept of 'frozen friendship' is important to describe the intimacy practices in LD close friendships. Although there was lack of contact with close friends at a distance, this type of friendship was maintained as the students have acquired

a high level of intimacy as well as mutual understanding. On the other hand, new close friendships formed in the UK have developed to be closer and important due to the limitation of co-presence and immediacy of physical distance. The students seek immediate help and responses as well as co-presence in which GC close friends are made as an alternative to LD close friends. Nevertheless, GC close friendships are expected to turn into 'frozen friendships' once the students graduate and might not be as close as when they are abroad.

In conclusion, I want to highlight my central argument that physical distance has an impact on intimate practices in close friendships but does not totally influence the emotional closeness. The temporary status of being abroad has changed the intimacy practices in LD and GC close friendships especially in the ways in which friends interact with each other as well as the frequency of contact. However, some close friendships are not affected by physical distance and infrequent contact. I argue that the temporary status of being abroad has turned some of the long-established close friends into frozen and fossil friends and turned some of the new friends formed abroad into close friends. However, it is not right to make an assumption that physical distance weakens a close friendship or physical proximity strengthens a new friendship and turns it into a close friendship. Physical distance does not totally affect close friendships as it depends on how the students value their friends as well as the intimacy level achieved in each particular friendship.

## CHAPTER SIX CONCLUSION

This has been a study of Malaysian perspectives of intimacy and close friendship practices, in the context of living temporarily abroad. I argued that Malaysian cultural norms and religious beliefs, as well as the situation of living abroad for a short period, have shaped and changed the ways in which Malaysian students practise intimacy in close friendships, while living abroad for a short period. As an international student, I found that life in the UK is different from Malaysia. It is not only due to weather – as Malaysia is hot and humid year-round, but also the lifestyle, social norms, religious beliefs and cultural practices. Despite the differences, the students try to adapt to British studying culture and at the same time try to blend the Malaysian norms and practices into their daily life in the UK. Although the students had been living in the UK for the purpose of study for more than a year, my study shows that Malaysian cultural and religious beliefs are still embedded in their lifestyle and shape the ways in which they are practising their gender, intimacy and close friendships.

I argued in this thesis that intimacy, as it has been developed in many Western studies, is an ethnocentric rather than a universal concept. Ethnocentric, in this context, means that understandings of intimacy and its practices are being centred on one's own culture. I suggest that intimacy practices in Malaysia, to some extent, are different from the intimacy practices in western countries. Consequently, debates on intimacy can be criticised for their Eurocentric approach in most western studies, as they do not give attention to the practices

of many in the majority world, including Asian and Malaysian culture as discussed in my study. It is important to not to be blinkered by a culturally and historically specific understanding of intimacy (Jamieson 2011). The forms through which intimacy is expressed and the ways it is felt change over time and different societies, cultures and religious beliefs have different sets of intimacy practices.

I argue that most Western studies' concepts of intimacy assume that all cultures would follow the same pattern and practice of intimacy as their own. In fact, it is clear that different societies hold different ideas about the meaning of love, family and relationships and practise intimacy in different ways. As my study focuses on Malaysian cultures, it offers something different from previous western studies as I explore the significant impact of Malaysian gender practices and religious beliefs in intimacy practices, specifically in close friendships. My discussions and findings contribute to a debate about intimacy which suggests that the practices of intimacy are socially constructed, and vary between cultures. I emphasise in my study that while some intimate acts are acceptable in one society, others might be perceived as inappropriate. My finding confirms that intimacy is built by the practices, and its elements can be similar and exchangeable (Jamieson, 2011). My study adds to Malaysian academic debates as there is insufficient attention especially to friendship and intimacy studies. My argument on the impact of cultural and religious practices on intimacy and close friendships should be developed in more depth in future studies, especially in Malaysia. Intimacy exists across historical and cultural

contexts in many acts and interactions, and has various meanings and practices in different societies.

Accordingly, one of my central findings is that the ways in which Malaysian students practise and idealise intimacy in close friendships are actually built by the practices of Malaysian cultural norms and religious beliefs. Social norms and religious beliefs not only shape the ways in which these students practice intimacy, but also influence the ways they practice gender in close friendships. My study has shown that the Malaysian male students evaded the 'sense of femininity' in the language and practices of intimacy. There are negative connotations of intimacy practices in close friendships which were associated with effeminate acts; such as behaving in expressive ways, due to expectations of 'being masculine' in Malaysian culture and complying with Malaysian gender norms as discussed in the previous studies (Fazli Khalaf et al. 2013; Goh 2014; Stivens 2006).

However, the ways in which the male students spoke about and practised intimacy are conflicting. My study highlighted that male students transgressed gender norms to have close and intimate friendships. The male students did not want to use the term 'best friend' as that appears to be too intimate but in their diaries and in interviews they showed their actual intimacy practices with close friends. Therefore, it is important to restate my argument that intimacy is a socially constructed practice in which it is flexible, exchangeable and depends on individual choices. I argued in this thesis that the ways in which Malaysian students practice instrumental and expressive close friendships are actually

influenced by the level of closeness achieved in the friendships. In this case, intimacy practices in close friendships are not entirely determined by the gender role ideologies of masculinity or femininity that are embedded in Malaysian culture but the ideal intimacy qualities achieved in the relationships. I argued that the practices of intimacy in some close friendships that acquired 'friend-like' and 'family-like' intimacy qualities are different from other relationships. Male and female students not only idealised the instrumental and expressive close friendships, but they also practice these acts of intimacy with those specific friends – who are mostly family members and childhood friends.

However, it is still important to pay attention to the impact of gender role ideologies on the gendered pattern of close friendships, as both male and female students in my study reported having a small number of cross-gender close friends and limited their intimacy practices with these friends. I argued that these gendered patterns are shaped by social norms and religious beliefs in Malaysia, which have constructed the idea of gender role dichotomy in which men and women are figured as different as discussed in previous studies (Abdullah et al. 2008; Hirschman 2016; Martin 2014; Noor 1999; Tan et al. 2002). The gender role ideologies have turned into gender practices that influenced the choices of intimate acts as well as the patterns of close friendships for both male and female students in my study. I found that it is crucial for future research to focus on the definition and practices of intimacy from an Asian standpoint, as well as the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and its negative connotation of intimacy practices in close friendships, especially in Malaysian and Asian contexts. My study's primary

focus was not about the expectations of being masculine in close friendships, and I indicated that the negative connotation of intimacy practices was mainly in the association of effeminate acts with homosexuality practices, which should be explored in more depth.

It is also important to highlight that religious practices seems to be the leading factor that influences the ways in which Malaysian students practise intimacy in close friendships. As I discussed earlier, some students are reported to limit their interactions with cross-gender friends as a consequence of religious obligation. My study not only adds to the debates of intimacy and close friendships but also to gender and religious studies. Sociological literature on the combination of friendship, gender and religion is not very extensive. It either focuses on family practices (Becher 2008), friendship and gender practices (Blatterer 2016; Cronin 2015; Gillespie et al. 2014, 2015; Policarpo 2017) or religion and gender practices (Avishai et al. 2015; Röder 2014; Neitz 2014; Scheible and Fleischmann 2012).

Instead, my study has shown that religious practices have built the idea of the meaning of intimacy and shaped the students' gender and close friendship practices. The practices of gender and close friendships constructed by religious practices, in this case, show the limit affection and closeness towards cross-gender friends as a result of being obedient as a religious subject. My finding supports Becher's (2008) study of South Asian Muslim families in Britain in which she found that religion influences the ideas of gender roles and obligations, as well as impacts on everyday routines and rituals. Future studies,

especially in western countries, would be useful to explore the impact of religion on gender, intimacy and friendship practices.

I believe the ways in which Malaysian students practice gender when they interact and engage with their close friends actually mirror cultural messages and beliefs regarding gender. Malaysian cultural norms and religious beliefs shaped the gender and intimacy practices specifically in close friendships as shown in my study, and the practices and acts of intimacy chosen by the students are considered acceptable unless they disobey rules and regulations of Malaysian social norms and religious beliefs, such as being physically intimate with cross-gender friends. My findings contribute to the debate of intimacy and gender in which I argue that the students drew on gendered ideas in their close friendships, but actually practiced their friendships in ways that diverged from the strictly gendered norms, so the ways in which Malaysian students practise intimacy in close friendships does not necessarily follow the norms.

Living abroad, albeit temporarily for the purposes of study, poses challenges for international students who must survive alone in unfamiliar surroundings at a relatively young age. This changes not only the intimacy practices but also the close ties between the students and family members and old friends back home. It is important to highlight that, even though the students started new life abroad as international students – for three to five years on average, they already have established close connections in Malaysia, where their life revolved around family members and sets of close friends including childhood friends,

schoolmates and college mates. When the students came to the UK, the struggle that they faced was not only to build new contacts in the UK but also to maintain the close bond with their long-established close friends who are mostly in Malaysia.

Although some of the students came to the UK with their college mates, on Malaysian government scholarships, most of them went to different universities so in effect they were alone. Furthermore, almost all students, except James who had already been studying in the UK, came to the UK as young sojourners for the first time to pursue their higher education. The students not only needed to adapt to unfamiliar faces and places, but they also needed to change their intimacy practices due to a new, different and temporary life in the UK. My study highlights that living temporarily abroad has changed the ways in which Malaysian students practise intimacy in close friendships either with GC close friends or with those who are physically distant. I suggest that the students are 'Malaysian-centric' even though they have resided in the UK for more than a year; religious differences among Malays, Chinese and Indians, the largest ethnic groups in Malaysia, do not stop Malaysians from different ethnicities and religions becoming close friends when they study abroad. Another reason why Malaysian student may remain Malaysian-centric is that there are large number of Malaysians living in the UK; in 2017, the UK census listed approximately 60,000 (Office for National Statistics 2017). I found that some of the students talked about how this large Malaysian population influenced their decision to further their higher education in the UK, besides the ranking of the university. They even reported that sometimes they did not feel that they had left Malaysia

as they live in the UK with such a large Malaysian community. My finding is consistent with Cebolla-Boado, Hu and Soysal (2018) who argue that the number of co-national students and university prestige influence Malaysian students' university choice abroad. However, I did not explore the factors influencing Malaysian students' university choice thoroughly in my thesis, and for that reason, I suggest further research to focus on this matter.

The finding of my study provides significant insights to the debates about co-national friendships in the previous studies (Alazzi and Al-Jarrah 2016; Weiss and Ford 2011) of Malaysian students living overseas. The students formed 'cultural cliques' with other Malaysian friends in the UK and found that it is easier to develop close friendships with them as well as to recreate 'home' and 'Malaysian-ness' in the UK as they shared a similar social background as Malaysians who are living overseas. Hence, I argue that shared beliefs, values and social norms between Malaysian friends help the students to cope with their new life in the UK which transformed their friendships from strangers into close friends within a short period.

Moreover, I have suggested a new concept of 'familiarity as a family' in this thesis as I have found that the sense of belonging and connectedness, as well as the feeling of oneness, have changed the ways in which Malaysian students practise intimacy with co-national friends. The concept of familiarity as a family offers some valuable insight into the concept of 'familiarity' discussed in the studies of students living abroad (see Ahmad et al. 2014; Alazzi and Al-Jarrah 2016; Prazeres 2016; Weiss and Ford 2011) as well the studies of family and

friendship. I found that the sense of familiarity formed some new practices of intimacy that are different from the practices of family and friendships. This kind of intimacy practice seems different to the 'friend-like' or 'family-like' intimacy qualities in the family and close friendships as discussed by Spencer and Pahl (2006). Instead, this is a new form of intimacy achieved in specific relationships in the specific situation of living temporarily abroad. Even though these kinds of relationship did not yet establish intimate bonds and achieve the ideal qualities of intimacy as in family and childhood friendship, the Malaysian students feel emotionally connected with their co-national friends abroad as they shared a similar nationality and cultural background as well as their shared experiences as sojourners.

Although cultural practices and religious beliefs seem to limit the intimacy practices especially in cross-gender friendships as discussed earlier in this chapter, my study highlights the formation of close friendships with Malaysian friends from different ethnicities and religions as one of the significant findings in my study. The students reported feeling close to co-national students to the extent that all Malaysians are perceived as 'friends' and the Malaysian community as a 'family'. I found that different ethnic groups and different religious beliefs did not affect the emotional connectedness in the co-national close friendships, although Malaysian interracial friendships are not the primary focus of my study. Hence, I suggest for future studies to explore close interracial friendships, especially for Malaysian students living abroad. Besides that, the concept of 'familiarity as a family' introduced in my study could be used to explore the practices of intimacy and close friendships of Malaysian or other

international students in overseas in future studies. The experience of living abroad appears to speed up the emotional closeness between international students as close friendships develop in a short time though sharing similar social space and physical activities.

Nevertheless, I argue that physical distance did not discourage the emotional connectedness between the students with their LD close friends. Instead, physical distance has changed the practices of intimacy. I claim that the ideal friend-like and family-like intimacy qualities acquired in these LD close friendships have strengthened the relationships and helped them to survive the geographical distance. These findings provide further understandings of the friend-like and family-like concept as suggested by Spencer and Pahl (2006). My study has shown that geographical distance and the feelings of homesickness remind the students of ideal qualities of intimacy achieved in their relationships with family members and childhood friends. Indeed, the emotional and significant life events experienced by the students with their family members and childhood friends have resulted in ontological security in their close friendships which help them to maintain their close ties despite living far away from each other.

However, some of their long-established close friendships are reported to be temporarily 'paused' due to the different physical and social space as well as time and commitment. The intimacy practices with these frozen friends are expected to return to normal, when the students go back to Malaysia for good. However, some LD close friendships did not survive the physical distance and

become 'fossil friends'. This type of friendship is reported to become emotionally close only when something happens that re-sparks the relationship; for example, meeting old friends in the UK, as reported in my study. Two participants talked about how face-to-face meetings remind them of the close bonds that they had had with their LD close friends.

The concept of 'frozen friends' in my study adds to Policarpo's (2016) claim that visiting is a main way of telling how important a particular LD close friendship still is and to keep it alive. It enables the re-enacting of intimacy and turns frozen friendships back into close ones. While some LD close friends, especially school and college mates established in Malaysia, turned into 'fossil friends' (Spencer and Pahl 2006) due to lack of physical and online contact. They no longer share similar 'intimate talks' and common interest due to different physical and social space as well as life commitments. I argue that these fossil friends might turn into frozen friends if something happens that re-sparks the relationship, especially when they have a chance to meet face-to-face.

Accordingly, I argued in this study that living temporarily abroad has changed the intimacy practices which turned close friendships into frozen and fossil friendships as well as strangers into close friends within a short period. The idea of frozen friends adds to the studies of intimacy and friendship as this kind of friendship emerges as a result of living temporarily abroad. It is important to highlight that mobility abroad becomes a substantial reason for the transformation of emotional connectedness in friendships. However, does the same situation apply to the students who are moving away from their hometown

to pursue their higher education in local universities in Malaysia? Hence, it is crucial for future studies to focus on the changes of closeness in friendship in the context of local mobility.

My concepts of 'familiarity as a family' and 'frozen friends' in the context of living abroad contribute to the wider debates on friendship, intimacy and family practices. These concepts illustrate new forms of close friendships and intimacy practices of Malaysian students living abroad. It is interesting to show how they can inform debates more broadly especially in family studies. Past studies have explored the concept of familiarity and the adaptation of living overseas. However, I use the concept of 'familiarity as a family' to explain a new form of relationship as a result of living alone and temporarily abroad. The common aspect of 'doing' family life – e.g. sharing a house and cooking, has created a sense of 'family' between the students and their co-national friends abroad without a need to acquire the 'family-like' intimacy qualities in their relationships. The concept of familiarity as a family in my study is different from the concept of 'families of choice' in non-heterosexual relationships in previous studies (Gillespie et al. 2015; Weeks et al. 2001). I argue that intimacy has been viewed ethnocentrically so it is important for western studies to explore whether the western view of intimacy is relevant and applicable in other situations or cultural practices.

As physical distance has changed the ways in which Malaysian students practice close friendships, social media has become one of the essential tools for intimate interaction between the students and their close friends who reside

in Malaysia as well as other countries outside of the UK. The students have no other choices but to use social media to facilitate and maintain the intimate interactions with their LD close friends, mostly through instant messenger, due to the different time zone and poor internet connection and because it allows the students to get and give responses at any time. This has been discussed in previous studies (Baym et al. 2004; Crystal Jiang and Hancock 2013; Holmes 2012; Ledbetter 2008). The students said they preferred face-to-face interactions because they feel emotionally connected and intimate when they see the facial expression and get the immediate response from their close friends. WhatsApp Messenger is the most popular social media used by the students as it is easy to use, free when connected to the internet and has more functions to text, send images and videos as well as make voice and video calls.

Nevertheless, my study adds to the debates on mobile intimacy in which social media also limit the emotional connectedness and intimacy practices between the students and their LD close friends. My study claims that social media are not immediate and intimate enough to allow users to express emotions. The students sought physical interaction, for example, to feel the touch and hugs, to celebrate the events and participate in physical activities, such as watching movies, travelling and playing sports together with their close friends in Malaysia. Living away from each other also limited the content of conversation as the students try to avoid talking about things that will make their close friends back home worried, especially financial and academic problems.

Nevertheless, I have argued that physical distance is not the same as emotional distance. LD close friendships survived through social media because meaningful memories and life events were shared. These memories have reminded the students of the close friendships established even though they did not meet each other regularly. However, physical distance obviously limits the physical contact that changes the practices of intimacy. The students and LD close friends needed to use social media and interact with each other in a virtual space. They controlled their feelings and expectations of not being able to be there physically when needed. Understanding and sensibilities towards the struggle of physical distance from the students and LD close friends helped both parties to maintain their close friendships despite the lack of contact.

I argued in this thesis that physical distance has changed the practices of intimacy between the students and their new GC close friends. GC close friends are reported to be perceived as an alternative for LD close friends. The students turned to new friends who are geographically and physically close to them for immediate help and response as well as physical support and activities. Lack of face-to-face meeting makes LD close friendship less intimate and the students prefer to talk to their GC close friends about daily activities they have in common in the UK, such as coursework and tests, as well as to do physical activities together like shopping and attending events.

Students project their feelings to new friends formed in the UK as they are physically available to them. Living together in the same house, taking the same academic course, participating in Malaysian community events and celebrating

Malaysian festivals together in the UK have facilitated the close ties between the students and these GC close friends. Consequently, the sense of familiarity as a family developed in their close friendships which started the first time the students met until they celebrated their graduation in a farewell party organised by Malaysian students' societies in the university.

The purpose of my study is to develop theories of intimacy in close friendships by exploring the meaning behind physical and emotional distance as well as the context of living temporarily abroad. My study offers the important insight that close friendships are not only defined by the length of time knowing each other or the knowledge that people have about each other. Close friendships can also be established in certain circumstances, such as living temporarily abroad in this case. One of the more significant findings to emerge from my study is that the situation of 'being temporarily abroad' affected and changed the intimacy practices in close friendships. These changes are not necessarily negative or show that close friendships are easily broken due to geographical distance. Instead, there is an alteration in the interaction and the ways people practise close friendships while living abroad.

My study has several limitations which are worth highlighting. First, the findings of my study cannot be generalised to the whole population of Malaysian students abroad as the sample size was limited and was not randomly selected. This study was conducted in three universities in the same region which is North West of England, United Kingdom which could be a limitation. Therefore, a larger sample size would be necessary to establish generalisability. Further

studies are needed from different universities and regions to acquire extensive analysis of students. The expectations, environments, Malaysian populations and socioeconomic statuses may differ in different university settings; therefore, the experiences of the Malaysian students in the practices of intimacy and close friendships may also vary.

Second, this study was based on experiences of Malaysian university students only. As my study relies on a university student sample, specifically undergraduate and postgraduate doing master's students, this result might not be generalisable to other samples, such as Ph.D. and visiting students, as well as non-student members of the Malaysian diaspora in the UK. Since this study focuses on unmarried students, research on married students should be conducted to explore whether the new forms of intimacy and close friendships practices as discussed in my study are applicable to these particular students. Moreover, future studies should also be conducted on Malaysian non-students living in the UK, different international students and British students who live away from home. I consider that the 'familiarity as a family' and 'frozen friends' concepts introduced in my study might be applicable to these samples.

Regardless of the limitations found in this study, I argue that my findings add to the understanding of the Malaysian students' experiences and practices of close friendships while living temporarily in the UK. The findings of my study suggest that people are still emotionally connected although they live far from each other. This is because living in a different geographical and social space does not affect the emotional closeness achieved in the close friendships.

Consequently, a key insight is that physical distance has enabled new forms of intimacy and does not inevitably equate to emotional distance. This study concludes that the ways in which Malaysian students practice close friendships while living temporarily abroad suggests that we require a rethinking of established notions of intimacy that go beyond an ethnocentric and universalist application of the concept.

## APPENDIX I PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET



### ***Friendship and Intimacy: Exploring Malaysian Students' Experiences of Living Temporarily Abroad***

I am a PhD student in the Department of Sociology at Lancaster University, and I am exploring the friendship practices of Malaysian students who live in the UK. Please read and consider the following information before deciding whether you would like to participate in my study.

#### **What is this study about?**

I would like to ask Malaysian students in the UK to complete a diary and a friendship map alongside an interview about their experiences of friendship practices. I am interested in participants' experiences of emotional connection and the use of social media in friendship practices as well as in discovering the impact of these practices on their friendship's strength and intimacy.

#### **Why have I been approached?**

You have been identified as a possible participant in this study because you are a Malaysian student in the UK and have been here for more than a year.

#### **What will I be asked to do if I take part in this study?**

You will be asked to agree to be interviewed by the researcher. The interviews will be conducted two times, may take up to one and a half hours and will be held on a date, time, and place to suit you. Alongside with the interviews, you will be asked to complete two friendship maps, once before the first interview and once before the second interview. After the first interview, you will be asked to complete a diary for a three weeks period, and you will be asked about the content of this diary during the second interview.

Before the interview starts, you will be asked to read and sign a Consent Form. If you agree, the interview will be audio recorded and will be transcribed. All interviews, maps and diaries will be anonymised prior to transcription. Only the researcher will know of your identity. If you do not agree to be recorded I will take notes during the interview, and will anonymise those notes.

#### **What do I do if I would like to take part in this study?**

If you would like to take part in this study, please contact me by emailing Nur Hafeeza Binti Ahmad Pazil ([n.ahmadpazil@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:n.ahmadpazil@lancaster.ac.uk)).

### **Do I have to take part?**

No. It is your choice whether to take part in this study. You are under no obligation to participate. There are no incentives for agreeing to take part, and there are no benefits to taking part. You do not need to offer an explanation if you decide not to take part.

### **Are there any risks to taking part in this study?**

No risks are anticipated if you participate in this study, but if you experience any distress during the interview, I will stop the interview and any recording. I will ask if you want to continue with the interview, and if you do not, I will contact you a week later to see if you want to resume the interview, or whether you want the data collected in the part-interview to be included in the study. If you do not, I will securely destroy the data.

As I will be asking about your experience of friendship practices, you may disclose your personal relationships and experiences. But your personal information is confidential and will be anonymised.

### **Withdrawal from the study**

You can refuse to answer any questions during the interview or stop it without offering any explanation. You can also withdraw from this study, without offering an explanation, up to three weeks after the first interview has been conducted. If you stop your interview and/or you withdraw from the study, no data collected prior to stopping the interview or withdrawing from the study will be used without your permission.

### **Will my data be confidential?**

Yes. The information you provide is confidential and will be anonymised when it is disseminated. Only the researcher will know the identity of the participant. For the purposes of privacy, the researcher will not be asking for names of your friends for friendship maps, diaries and interviews but instead, you will use pseudonyms to which a code number will be applied by the researcher. Alternatively, you could use code numbers yourselves.

During and after the study, all data will be my responsibility and will be stored securely on University premises. The digital recorder cannot be encrypted but I can confirm that any identifiable data (including recordings of participants' voices) will be deleted from the recorder as quickly as possible (when it has been transferred to my university network account, on a password protected PC) and in the meantime the recorder will be stored securely. Hard copies of the transcriptions or notes, maps and diaries will be kept in a locked filing cabinet on University premises. Electronic data files will be encrypted and stored on password protected computer. All data will only be accessible to the

researcher. All data relating to the study will be securely destroyed ten years after the study has been completed.

**What will happen to the result of the study?**

The results of the study will be published in my doctoral research thesis and sociological journals and will be presented at academic seminars and conferences. A summary of the results will be made available to all participants.

**Who has reviewed the study?**

The study has been approved by Lancaster University's Research Ethics Committee.

**Where can I obtain further information about the study?**

If you have any queries about the study, please feel free to contact me at [n.ahmadpazil@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:n.ahmadpazil@lancaster.ac.uk) or by phone on +447477418304, or my supervisors, Dr Anne Cronin ([a.cronin@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:a.cronin@lancaster.ac.uk)) and Dr Debra Ferreday ([d.ferreday@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:d.ferreday@lancaster.ac.uk)).

**What if I have concerns about any aspect of the study?**

If at any stage of the study you wish to speak about a concern or complaint relating to this study, please contact my Head of Department, Dr Bronislaw Szerszynki ([bron@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:bron@lancaster.ac.uk)) at Department of Sociology, Lancaster University, Lancaster, LA1 4YT.

APPENDIX II CONSENT FORM



- 1. I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet given to me for the above study, and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- 2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw from this study, without giving any reasons, and that my legal rights will not be affected. I am free to refuse to answer any question.
- 3. I understand that if I want to withdraw from the study, I can do so at any point up to three weeks after the interview has been conducted.
- 4. I understand that if I withdraw up to three weeks after my first interview has been conducted, any data collected will not be used without my consent.
- 5. I understand that my interview will be recorded and transcribed by the researcher and only the researcher will know my identity.
- 6. I understand that anonymised quotes from my interviews, maps and diaries may be used in the dissemination of the research, and that any personal data will remain confidential, and my details are known only to the researcher.
- 7. I understand that the transcription or interviews notes, maps and diaries will be kept in a locked filing cabinet on University premises. Any electronic files will be encrypted and stored on a password-protected computer. No one other than the researcher will be able to access the data collected for this study. All data will be securely destroyed ten years after the study has been completed.
- 8. I agree to participate in this study.
- 9. I agree with my interview being audio-recorded.

-----  
Name of Participant

-----  
Participant's Signature

-----  
Date

-----  
Name of Researcher

-----  
Researcher's Signature

-----  
Date

## APPENDIX III INTERVIEW QUESTIONS GUIDE



### *Friendship and Intimacy: Exploring Malaysian Students' Experiences of Living Temporarily Abroad*

#### INTERVIEW 1

Date:

Time:

---

#### **Introduction**

Introduce self

Reaffirm confidentiality

Restate aims of the project:

- To identify the meaning of close friendship in Malaysian students' perspectives.
- To discover Malaysian students' experiences of friendship practices in the context of living temporarily abroad.
- To investigate the distance and closeness in friendship
- To explore the use of social media in maintaining friendships

Ask demographic questions:

- Age
- Sex
- Marital Status
- Relationship Status
- Period of Mobility
- Social Class
- Sponsorship
- Hometown
- Year of Study
- Course
- University

Introduce friendship map and sticky labels

- Ask participants to list people who are important to them on the labels.
  - Ask the participants to arrange the stickers on the first friendship map.
- 

### **Ordering Friendships**

- How did you draw up the list? How easy or difficult was it to limit to 20 labels?
- Did you have to leave people out? What kind of people? How many?

*If other names come up during the interview, write on other labels.*

- Are some of these people more important to you than others?

*While the labels are being stuck on the friendship map, briefly ask for each person:*

- What is his/her age?
- Where does he/she live?
- What does he/she do for a living?
- What is his/her social class?
- What is his/her ethnicity?
- Since when do you know each other?

*Explore criteria*

- Why have people been placed there?
  - How would you label/describe the different circles?
  - What is the difference between friendships in the different circles? (What criteria are they using?)
  - How did you form this friendship? What criteria?
- 

### **Comparing Friendships**

- You have described some of the people on the map as a friend. What is a friend? What does it mean to have a friend?
- Do you have a best friend or best friends? Why/why not? What is a best friend to you?
- What do you expect in friendship?
- Do you have any different expectation for different friends? What are these differences?
- What do you feel when you did not get this expectation?

- What do you do to your friends when you did not get this expectation?

#### *Family Members*

- Did you list any family members on your map? Why?
- What do family members mean to you?
- How does friendship compare with family relationships? Do friendship and family members in a same level of relationship? Why if Yes/No?
- Do you get something out of friendship that you do not get out of family relationships?
- Do you get something out of a family that you do not get from friends?

#### *Friends*

- What is the difference between friends in each circle? What do they do together or share?
  - Which (if any) of these people would you turn to if:
    - you wanted to have some fun
    - you wanted to share happy stories or news
    - you were having difficulties with your studies
    - you were having difficulties in a relationship
    - you were having financial difficulties
    - you suffered a bereavement/lost someone close to you
    - you became ill and needed help
  - Why do those people in particular?
  - Who do you tend to confide in? What sorts of things?
  - Whom do you feel you have most in common with? What sorts of things?
- 

### **Key concepts in Friendship**

#### *Length of Friendship*

- How long have you known each other?
- Does the length of the friendship impact your close friendship? Why/Why not?
- How about new friends? What is the difference between established and new friends?
- Do you choose certain topics to talk about with certain friends?
- What is your opinion regarding the length of friendship and close friendship?

### *Similarity*

- Do you share certain similarities with your friends? What are these similarities?
- How does similarity influence your formation of friendship or development of friendship?
- Do your conversation with your friends lies on the topic of similarity? Why/Why not?
- Do you have friends who are not similar in sex/ age/ ethnicity/ nationality/ social class/ interest/ hobbies?
- Why do you still choose these friends as the important people in your life?
- What is your opinion regarding similarity and close friendship?

### *Comfortability*

- Which (if any) of these people that you feel most comfortable to talk/meet? Why?
- What do you talk about when you feel comfortable with someone?
- What types of conversations do you avoid talking about with someone that you are not comfortable with?
- How do you feel that you are comfortable with someone?
- What is your opinion regarding comfortability and close friendship?

### *Honesty*

- Do you be yourself when interacting with these friends? Who are you disclosing yourself more openly and who do you not? Why? Or is it different for different types of friends?
- Do you be honest with your friends? Have you lied about anything to your friends? Why/Why not? Or is it different for different types of friends?
- Do your friends be honest with you? If not why? What are your feelings on this matter?
- What is your opinion regarding honesty and close friendship?

### *Trust*

- Who do you trust more in your life? Why do you trust that person?
- Do you have any stories related to trust?
- When do you trust someone?

- What stories/problems that you tell someone you trust?
- What is your opinion regarding trust and close friendship?
- How about secrets? Whom do you trust to keep your secrets?
- Did that person keep your secret? What if they did not?
- What do you feel when your friends cannot be trusted?
- What is your opinion regarding trust and close friendship?

*Worriedness*

- How does the feeling of worriedness impacts on your friendship?
- Do you choose topics to talk about to avoid your friends from being worried? Why/Why not?
- How do you feel when your friends feel worried towards you?
- Does worriedness mean that you care about someone's feelings?
- What is your opinion regarding worriedness and close friendship?

*Ask for any other concepts*

**Characteristics of Selected Friendships**

*Select relationships for more in-depth exploration according to the circle on the map/types of relationship*

*Start with long-distance friends*

- Do you still keep in touch with your established friends who are not in the UK?
- Who are these established friends?
- How often do you keep in touch?
- How do you contact each other?
- What do you talk about?
- Has the relationship developed and changed? Is it same as or different from when you first met? How? Why?
- Were there any particular turning points that change your friendship? What are they?
- Has the friendship changed in importance or intensity?

- In what situations have you/would you turn to this person for support? Do they turn to you?  
[Collect examples/stories/accounts]
- Do you feel the relationship is reciprocal/there is the same amount of 'give and take'?
- How important is the relationship?

*For close-distance friends*

- Do you still keep in touch with your established friends who live in the UK? Who are these established friends?
- Do you make any new friends when you came to the UK?  
Who are these new friends?
- How often do you keep in touch?
- How do you contact each other?
- What do you talk about?
- Has the relationship developed and changed? Is it same as or different from when you first met? How? Why?
- Were there any particular turning points that change your friendship? What are they?
- Has the friendship changed in importance or intensity?
- In what situations have you/would you turn to this person for support? Do they turn to you?  
[Collect examples/stories/accounts]
- Do you feel the relationship is reciprocal/there is the same amount of 'give and take'?
- How important is the relationship?

*For family:*

- Describe relationship
- Do you have a friendship/friend-like relationship with any members of your family? How/why? Why not?
- Do you have a family-like relationship with any of your friends? How/why? Why not?

---

**Conclusion**

Ask if the interviewer has missed anything important about their friendships

Ask for comments about what we have discussed, or about the research as a whole

Introduce a diary and explain how to fill out the diary

- Ask for consent to write the diary for three-week period
- Ask for consent to participate in the second interview

Set up the second interview

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS GUIDE



### *Friendship and Intimacy: Exploring Malaysian Students' Experiences of Living Temporarily Abroad*

#### INTERVIEW 2

Date:

Time:

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##### **Introduction**

Reaffirm confidentiality

Restate aims of the project:

- To identify the meaning of close friendship in Malaysian students' perspectives.
- To discover Malaysian students' experiences of friendship practices in the context of living temporarily abroad.
- To investigate the distance and closeness in friendship
- To explore the use of social media in maintaining friendships

Restate things that have been discussed in the previous interview

Introduce the second friendship map and sticky labels

- Based on the diary, ask participants to arrange people whom they have interacted within the three-week period after the first interview.
- 

##### **Practicing Friendship using Social Media**

*While the labels are being stuck on the second friendship map, briefly ask:*

- Did you list the same person as you are listed on the first friendship map? Why? Why not?

*If other names come up on the second map:*

- Why did you leave out this person on the first friendship map?

*Explore criteria*

- Why have people been placed there?
- What is the difference between friendships in the different circles? (What criteria are they using?)
- How would you label/describe the different circles?

*Face-to-face Interaction*

- When did you have a face-to-face interaction with your friends?
- How often do you have a face-to-face interaction with each other?
- Why do you have a face-to-face interaction with each other?
- Does physical distance influence you to have a face-to-face interaction?
- Do you prefer to have a face-to-face interaction instead of using social media? Why? Why not?
- In what situation do you prefer to have a face-to-face interaction with your friends?
- Do face-to-face interaction influence your friendship practices when you live abroad? Why? Why not?
- Has the relationship developed and changed when you use face-to-face interaction? Is it same as or different from when you first met? How? Why?
- Were there any particular turning points? What are they?

*Connecting using Social media*

- What types of social media do you usually use?
- Do you use different types of social media for different friends or types of interaction?
- How often do you use social media to contact each other?
- Why are you using social media to contact each other?
- Does physical distance influence you to use social media?

- Do you prefer to use social media instead of face-to-face interaction? Why? Why not?
- In what situation do you use social media to contact your friends?
- Do social media influence your friendship practices when you live abroad? Why? Why not?
- Has the relationship developed and changed when you use social media? Is it same as or different from when you first met? How? Why?
- Were there any particular turning points? What are they?

### **Friendship Connection**

*Select relationships for more in-depth exploration according to ring on map/content on diary*

- What do you do when you contact each other using social media/face-to-face?
- What do you talk about?
- How do you feel when you use social media/face-to-face interaction to contact each other?
- Do you contact each other when you have problems?
- Why do you tend to confide in this person in particular?
- Do you have any shared emotional experiences with this person? [*Collect examples/stories/accounts*]
- Do you feel the relationship is emotionally reciprocal/there is give and take?
- Do you feel the sense of presence and immediacy when you contact each other?
- Does expression on online/face-to-face interaction give the emotional impression to you?
- How important is the friendship?
- You have described some of the people on the map as a close friend, how do you assess the strength/closeness of friendship? (What criteria are they using?)
  - the frequency of contact
  - physical contact
  - the content of the interaction
  - trust and reciprocity

- the sense of presence and immediacy
- [other criteria]
- Do you consider that using social media/face-to-face to practice your friendship has strengthened or weakened your friendship closeness? Why? Why not?
- Are there any rules/expectations/dos and don'ts of in friendship practices using social media? What are they?
- Does emotional practices in friendship developed and changed since you moved abroad?
- Does friendship change in importance or intensity when you use social media to practice your friendship?

**Distance and Closeness in Friendship Ties**

- How does distance give impact on your friendship?
- Does physical distance make your friendship less intimate?
- When there is physical distance, does it mean that there is emotional distance?
- When you are physically close, does it mean that you are emotionally closer?
- Does using social media/face-to-face blur the distance? What is your opinion regarding this matter?
- Can you give an example/stories/experience regarding this?
- What do you do to sustain your emotional connection with your friends?
- Do your friends do the same thing?
- How does your or your friends' efforts to sustain emotional connection lead to a close friendship?
- Do you have any stories regarding this?
- What do you do to sustain your friendship ties?
- What do you think of regarding your friendship, whether established or new ones, when you have already finished your studies and going back to Malaysia

## **Conclusion**

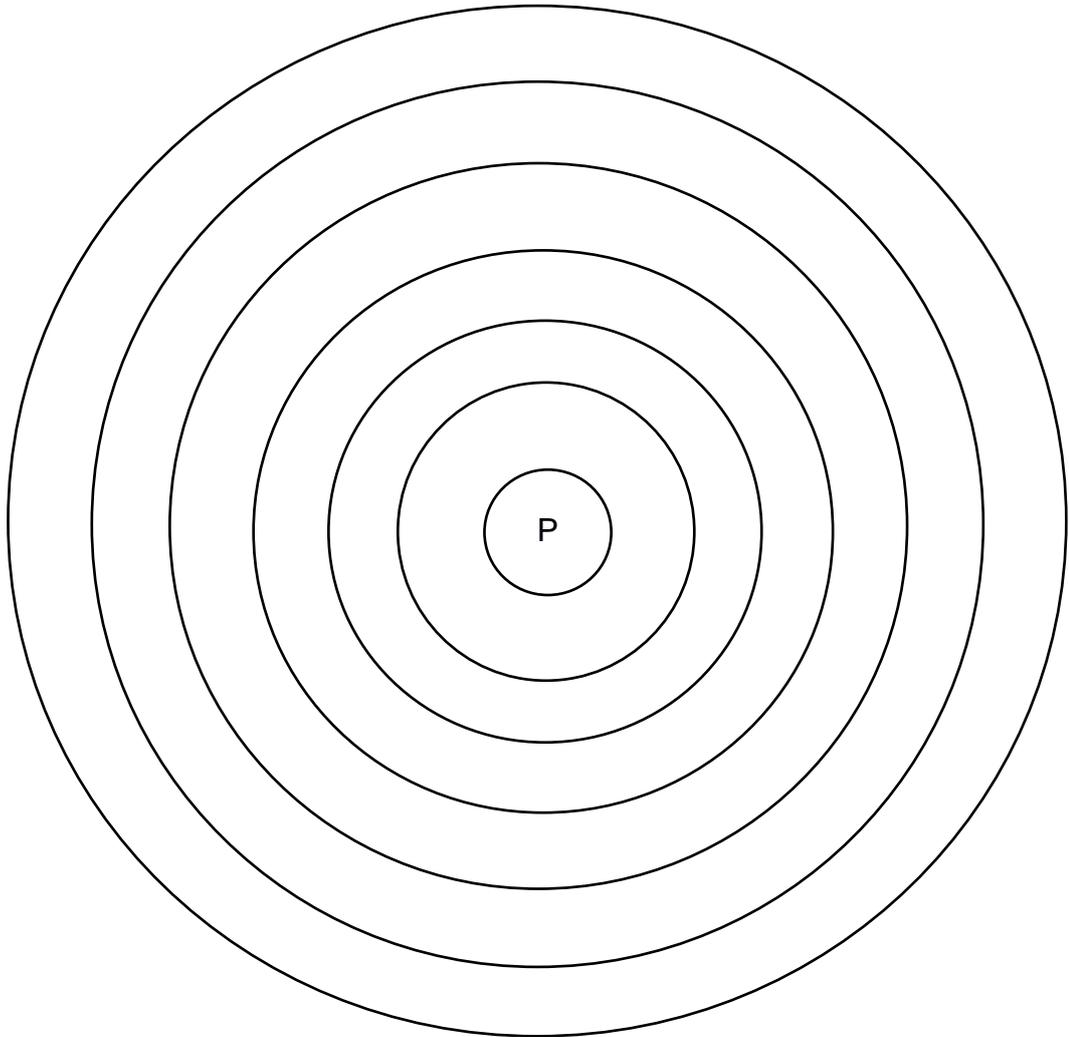
Ask if anything has been missed out or if there is anything to add

Ask for comments about what we have discussed, or about the research as a whole

Ask if the participant wants to see a transcript of the interviews

Restate that they are welcome to have a summary of the research findings and a full copy of the final reports

**APPENDIX IV FRIENDSHIP MAP**



## APPENDIX V FRIENDSHIP DIARY

Friendship Diary - OneNote

File Home Insert Draw History Review View

Clipboard Basic Text Styles Tags

Face-to-face (Ctrl+1)  
Others (Ctrl+2)  
Whole Day (Ctrl+3)

To Do Tag  
Find Tags  
Email Page  
Email

Friendship Diary My Journal INSTRUCTION Week 1 Week 2 Week 3 Credit +

Search (Ctrl+E)

+ Add Page

Friendship Diary

# Friendship Diary

friendship,  
Social Interaction  
& Intimacy

Name:  
Age:  
Institution of Study:



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